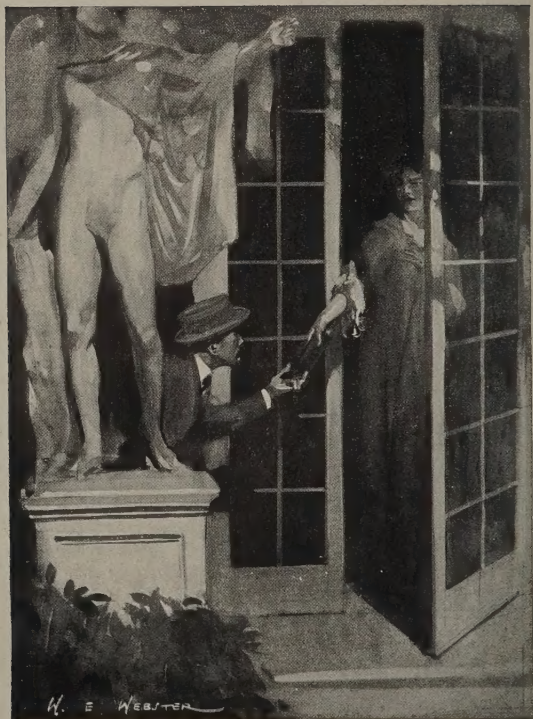


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"Quick," she whispered beneath her breath, "take it."

THE MAN FROM
DOWNING STREET

A MYSTERY

By
WILLIAM LE QUEUX

Author of

"Of Royal Blood," "The Gamblers,"
"The Under Secretary,"
etc.

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THE MAN FROM DOWNING STREET

CHAPTER I

TELLS A TENDER TALE

" THEN even now you don't know her real name ? "

" No," I replied ; " nor her address."

" H'm !—rather suspicious."

" Well, just a trifle, I admit. But now you've heard the facts of the little romance, Kirkwood, what's your theory regarding her ? "

" She may, after all, be a mere adventuress," my friend remarked with a smile.

" But, my dear fellow, you don't know her. She's absolutely charming."

" In the gaslight, perhaps. There are lots of women of her sort in London. They love to surround themselves with mystery. Mind you're not taken in."

" Well," I said, with just a little pride, " I'm not the kind of man to be deceived by a woman. Remember my profession."

"Even an attaché like yourself, who has run the whole gamut of love in the Continental capitals, may be misled by a woman, providing he is in love with her, as you appear to be."

"Now, George, you're just a bit unfair," I protested. "You don't know her, so you're not in a position to judge the matter impartially."

"I quite admit that," replied my friend. "But why did you seek my opinion?"

"Because you are one of my best and most intimate friends," I answered. Then I added: "It seems to me that your suspicion is aroused because she declines to reveal who she really is."

"Exactly so."

"There may be reasons," I said.

He grinned, took a long pull at his whisky and soda, and looking me straight in the face said: "Of course. She may be a married woman for aught you know. Mind you don't land yourself in an awkward fix with an irate and jealous husband, Jardine. Many a better man than you has been fooled by a woman, remember."

"Oh, certainly," I laughed. "But really your warnings sound dreadful. As to Clare

being a married woman, why, the thing's absurd. She's not more than twenty, with all the sweet ingenuousness of a school-girl."

"Well, women marry before twenty sometimes," he remarked philosophically. "But when a fellow is in love it's utterly useless to argue or to warn. You've met a mysterious woman who interests you, and the whole affair is full of delightful romance. I've got nothing to do with it. All I say, and that most emphatically, is, from what you've told me, I have very strong suspicions of the young lady who wears costly rings and calls herself Clare—what is her other name?"

"Clare Stanway," I said.

"Besides, she's a foreigner!"

"I think so. But of what nationality I'm at present unable to determine. She speaks French perfectly."

"H'm. And she assumes an Irish name."

My old friend, George Kirkwood, chief clerk at the London and North Western Bank in Lombard Street, smiled across the edge of his big tumbler.

"She has an object in so doing, that's certain," I said, somewhat irritated.

The story I had confided to him in the privacy of my own rooms was, to say the least, a strange one.

Where women were concerned, I had never been very impressionable. Perhaps it was because I was blessed with three sisters who tantalized and tormented me as a boy, and made me their drudge as a youth. At any rate, after some years in a cavalry regiment, followed by active work in the confidential department of the Foreign Office, during which time I had mixed with all sorts and conditions of women both at home and abroad, the chords of sentiment in my heart had remained untouched till about three months before, when I had first met and spoken with the slim, sweet-mannered girl who called herself Clare Stanway.

I was idling at home after an absence of some eight months at Belgrade, where, as secret agent of the British Government—although nominally attaché at our Embassy—I had been engaged in watching and investigating certain diplomatic juggling between Queen Draga of Servia and the Russian Government. My profession as secret agent compelled me to spend the greater part of my time in one or other of the Continental

capitals, therefore any little relaxation at home in the comfort of my own chambers in Great Russell Street was extremely welcome. One can soon tire of such constant travel and the many changes that are inseparable from the life of a secret agent. There is, I know, something repugnant to the British mind where the secret agent is concerned; but it must be remembered that England's enemies nowadays keep up a whole army of unscrupulous spies. She is compelled, therefore, both in her own interests and in those of European peace, to supplement her attachés at the various Embassies by a corps of secret agents, of which I held office as chief.

Up and down Europe, now in Petersburg, now in Madrid, sometimes in Rome and at others in Vienna, I led the life of a diplomatic free-lance, ranking as attaché, on terms of personal friendship with every one of His Majesty's ambassadors, and often holding secrets which, if betrayed, might result in serious international complication.

In my work of investigation it was incumbent upon me to be constantly on the alert, for I knew well that I was often followed by the agents of other nations, who would stick at no trifle to possess themselves of know-

ledge I had gained, and who actually ardently desired my entire suppression. Why? Because I had, in certain difficult and important matters, fortunately been able to turn the diplomatic current against our hereditary enemies and in favour of ourselves.

There is a good deal that is both exciting and romantic in the work of the secret agent abroad. The Most Noble the Marquess of Glinton, His Majesty's principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, known to the Foreign Office staff as "the Chief," often took me into his confidence, and there were occasions on which I was in possession of diplomatic facts unknown even to the ambassadors themselves. Indeed, the department of which I held the direction was under the personal control of the Marquess himself, and it was not seldom that we were closeted together discussing affairs of State such as were only known to members of the Cabinet.

George Kirkwood, who was a typical bank clerk and dapper City man, knew this, and I suppose the very fact of my patriotic calling caused him surprise that I was "gone"—as he rather vulgarly termed it—over a woman. My heart was, indeed, supposed to

be case-hardened where the other sex were concerned.

Now there is a good deal of the first person singular in this story. Nevertheless it will, I believe, be found to be one of the most extraordinary and puzzling enigmas that it has ever been the lot of police or public to attempt to unravel ; and yet at the same time as truly romantic as though it had all occurred a couple of centuries ago, instead of in these modern days of millionaires and motors.

I, Jack Jardine, son of John Bramall Jardine, Knight, of Woodstone Hall, in Cheshire, can myself alone relate the true facts. Many have been of necessity hidden from the public ken ; because, as will be seen later, if they had become known prematurely they would have crept into the papers, and a terrible scandal affecting a certain family of high repute would have been thereby caused. Hence, it is only to-day, by reason of certain circumstances which have recently occurred, that the bond of secrecy has been removed from my lips, and I am able to set down the plain, unvarnished and astounding facts.

I met Clare Stanway in quite ordinary circumstances, just in the same way as many a man in London meets a pretty girl. After

the long inquiry in Belgrade, where I had been successful in solving the mystery of King Alexander's desire to abdicate the Servian throne, I was enjoying the ineffable comfort of my own "grandfather" armchair by my own fireside, that same old chair in which I was sitting while in conversation with George Kirkwood. Great Russell Street, Bloomsbury, is not the most cheerful of London thoroughfares, but, with some furniture from my old home up in Cheshire, I had managed to make my rooms replete with old-fashioned comfort, and during the past ten years of frequent wanderings up and down Europe the sombre old apartments on the second floor of a smoke-begrimed eighteenth-century house had been the place I called "home."

Gazetted as extra attaché as occasion had arisen, I had been appointed to one Embassy after another in order to carry out certain secret missions; hence I had been forced to move in the smartest circles in Europe and to mix with the gayest set in the gayest cities. And as an antidote to all that whirl of excitement and dining out, I delighted in the quiet hours at my own fireside, with my early-printed books which I was always

collecting from dealers in the various cities in which I found myself. A cosmopolitan from my birth—my mother having been French and my father English—I was just as much at home in the Boulevard des Italiens, or the Corso, as in Piccadilly, while the Wilhelmstrasse and the Newski were to me just as familiar as our own curved Regent Street. Alas! it is to one's detriment to become cosmopolitan, for thus one grows too *blasé*, and too careless of the little conventional world surrounding one's own English home.

But all this is again of myself, and I therefore ask the reader's pardon. This story is of others besides. Most people worship two gods, the god of power and the god of gold. The last generally comes first even in the international intrigues which have from time to time menaced the peace of Europe, and it is owing to the worship of the last-named, that I am to-day enabled to place on paper a record of this mystery and the essentially confidential inquiry which followed.

The romance had an entirely prosaic opening. One dreary November evening, having nothing particular to do, and seeing in my *Pall Mall* the usual advertisement of a grand firework display at that resort of our country

cousin, the Crystal Palace, I left Ludgate Hill Station by train for that suburban pleasure resort. I knew that I could get a passable dinner in the restaurant, and afterwards witness a pyrotechnical exhibition second to none in the world. With the night dark and calm, everything favoured the celebration of the Guy Fawkes anniversary, which, even in these sadly degenerate days, is still kept after a fashion.

From London until I arrived at Lordship Lane Station I was alone in a first-class compartment, but at the last-named stopping-place, a well, even elegantly, dressed young lady got in and seated herself in the corner farthest from me.

Lordship Lane is a somewhat superior suburb. On Sydenham Hill live many prosperous merchants, stockbrokers and lawyers, whose business takes them into the City daily. Most of the houses are large and old-fashioned, each standing in its own grounds, with gravelled carriage drives in front and stabling behind. My fellow passenger I at once took to be the daughter of some City man residing in that neighbourhood, for most families hold season-tickets of admission to the Crystal Palace, and of an

evening constantly travel backwards and forwards by train, for only one station intervenes.

She seemed out of breath by hurrying, and after giving me one quick glance of modest inquiry, sat back in the corner and busied herself in lacing her gloves, laces being then the mode. She had, I noticed, wonderfully fine eyes, dark, sparkling, penetrating. Her refined face was oval, with perfectly moulded features, a sweet mouth and soft, brown, well-dressed hair. Hers was a countenance so open in its simplicity and yet so perfect in its contour, that I sat gazing at her, entirely fascinated by her wondrous beauty.

She had come upon me like a flash, holding me entranced. The carriages of the dual "sloths," the Chatham and South Eastern Company, are none too well lighted; nevertheless, as she sat, the light, or as much as there was of it, fell full upon her, revealing to me the most beautiful face I had ever seen, either in the gilded *salons* of diplomatic Europe or out of them. She had a perfectly lovely countenance, and her figure in its neat, tight-fitting bolero, trimmed with fur, was one that any duchess might have envied.

Again she glanced at me, apparently in

resentment at my rudeness in gazing so hard at her, then pretended to occupy herself with the contents of the purse she carried in her hand.

At that instant a brilliant glitter caught my eyes, and I saw that she was wearing a magnificent diamond bracelet, which beneath the light sparkled and scintillated with a thousand fires.

Who was she? I wondered.

I longed to speak to her, but no excuse presented itself, and at the Crystal Palace Station she alighted and, swiftly passing the turnstile into the Palace itself, disappeared in the crowd that had journeyed from town by our train in order to witness the fireworks, for the fifth of November display is one of the annual events for South Londoners.

CHAPTER II

WHICH CONTAINS A MYSTERY

OUT in the spacious pleasure-grounds of the Palace the crowd along the terrace was very large, and although my eyes searched eagerly everywhere for sight of my dainty little divinity, I could see nothing of her.

I watched the display until the end—the

fountains of fire, the ascent of the rockets, and the patriotic "set-piece;" then, with hundreds of others, wandered through the illuminated grounds until nearly closing time. In endeavouring, however, to cross from the rosary to the entrance beyond the North Tower, I suddenly found myself off the central walk in a dark narrow path which seemed to wind towards the direction for which I was making. There were courting couples in various parts of the grounds, as there always are on such occasions, therefore I should have overtaken and passed unnoticed the couple who were strolling before me, had I not been suddenly aroused by a woman's startled cry.

"You—you coward! Ah! I know you now! Help—help!"

I saw the two figures struggling in the darkness, but as I rushed up the man released the woman and, dashing away along the path, evaded me, while the woman stood panting and wringing her hands.

"What's the matter?" I asked quickly.
"What has occurred?"

Then, as I bent forward to distinguish her face, I saw that she was none other than my pretty fellow-traveller.

"We have met once before this evening," I said, raising my hat. "If I can be of assistance to you, pray command me."

"You are extremely kind," she answered, with her hand upon her heart as though to suppress her agitation. "I—I was perhaps foolish to cry out, but——" and she hesitated.

"But what? Tell me what has happened."

"Oh, nothing," she declared with a strenuous endeavour to calm herself. "Really nothing, I assure you."

"You are trembling," I said. "Come, you must at least allow me to accompany you to some place, where you will be free from the molestations of that cowardly fellow who has just run off."

"You are very good," she answered, as though half hesitating to place her trust in me. "I have been awfully foolish, I know." She spoke English perfectly, yet with just a slight foreign accent.

"Then forget it all," I said. "Come, let's go back." And I walked at her side along the path until we came to the Archery Ground, and thence out by the side gate on West Hill, afterwards proceeding along the

front of the Palace to the High Level station, where we took train.

Regarding the reason of her cry for assistance or the identity of the man, she would reveal to me nothing. I shrewdly suspected that he was her lover whom she had met clandestinely in an unfrequented part of the grounds, and that some quarrel had arisen between them. Yet it was certainly strange that if such were actually the case, the fellow should take to his heels on my approach. Mystery, too, was added by the fact that although I gave her my card and assured her of my willingness to assist her in any way and at the same time to regard the matter as confidential, she would not give me her real name.

"Call me—what shall we say?—Clare Stanway," she replied, when we were seated again in the train. "That name will do just as well as any other."

"Then it is not your real name?" I said regretfully. "May I not know that?"

"No," she responded firmly. "I am sorry that I am unable to satisfy your curiosity as to that."

So I called her "Miss Stanway," and she, in return, addressed me as "Captain Jardine."

"Do you know," I said, "I somehow feel assured that some very unpleasant event occurred to you to-night. I do wish you would allow me to become your friend. It is true I am a stranger, but when you know me better you will not hesitate to place confidence in me. The man who fled on my approach means mischief. Am I not correct in assuming that?"

She was silent for some moments. "Yes," she answered at last, in a hard voice, "I believe he does."

"Then you will want a friend, and in me you will find one devoted," I said earnestly.

"I have already found a gentleman," she answered, raising her fine eyes to mine for a moment. "Yet even though I may desire a friend, I could not think of troubling you with my very unimportant affairs." She spoke with an air of confidence.

"Not at all," I assured her. "Let us meet again and discuss the situation. Where and when can you see me?"

Again she hesitated, and I saw that she was not quite sure whether she ought to trust me—a total stranger.

"Ah!" she sighed at last. "If I only thought you would really stand my friend!"

"Your friend, Miss Stanway!" I cried. "Why I am not only willing, but very anxious to assume that position. Where shall we meet?"

She was again silent and pensive.

"It must be in secret," she said. "If I meet you, I run a great risk—and I may bring disaster upon you."

"Oh, have no fear," I laughed. "I suppose there is a jealous somebody in the case, eh?"

"Well," she said, cleverly disregarding my query, "I could perhaps see you to-morrow night at eight o'clock at the corner of Crescentwood Road and Sydenham Hill. If you come to Lordship Lane Station, you will easily find the spot."

"That's an appointment," I exclaimed, much gratified. "I shall be there to await you. May I not get out now, and see you safely home?"

"Oh dear, no," she laughed. "*He* will not follow me here. I am not afraid now that—well, now that I've found a friend in you," she added with a sweet frankness that charmed me.

"You do me a great honour, I'm sure," I said. "You may certainly rely upon me

for any service which you may wish performed."

Then, just at that moment the train pulled up at the quiet suburban station of Lordship Lane, and she alighted, resolutely declining the offer of my company as far as her home.

"Good-night," she said, with her coquettish musical accent, "until to-morrow."

She waved her hand to me, and a moment later was lost in the darkness.

Her beauty, her charm of manner, her natural modesty and the mystery of the unknown fugitive were sufficient incentive to cause me to take train on the following night to Lordship Lane, and to await her at the junction of the two quite eminently respectable suburban roads which she had indicated.

Arriving fully a quarter of an hour before the time appointed, I lit a cigarette and took observations of the surroundings. There was a *souffçon* of adventure in it all, even to me, essentially an adventurer, who had so often carried my liberty in my hand. The road in the chilly dampness of the winter night was dark and silent. Around, were big, well-lit, comfortable houses standing back with

large, leafless trees overhanging the roadway ; indeed, the neighbourhood seemed, as I stood there waiting, almost like the outskirts of a country town, save that behind me in the sky shone the glare of giant London.

The postman on his delivery passed me with an inquiring glance, and I afterwards heard his double rap in the distance. A scurrying servant-girl in cap and apron came to the pillar box to post a letter, a dog barked in the distance, and trains whistled, but there was no other movement during the quarter of an hour I waited, until a church clock somewhere struck eight, and five minutes later my neat-waisted, mysterious little divinity appeared, dressed exactly as she had been on the previous night.

With eager, out-stretched hand I advanced to her, and our meeting was mutually cordial. Quite calm, and seeming rather to enjoy the adventure of that clandestine meeting, she strolled slowly beside me down the Sydenham Hill Road and thence to Upper Sydenham and Forest Hill. Even then, however, she declined to answer any of my leading questions, or to satisfy my curiosity as to where she lived.

To my question as to the identity of the

man with whom she had struggled so fiercely on the previous night, she only replied that he was "once a friend," from which I concluded that he was some jealous admirer who had endeavoured to force her to a confession of love.

The situation was a strange one. She was so entirely charming, and yet so mysterious. Both her past and her present she hid from me completely, and when I reproached her she merely said :

"There are reasons—very potent ones—why I should not tell you who or what I am. Besides, it could serve no purpose. You are my friend, and I am very grateful, I assure you. I sorely need a friend just now," and she sighed as though some dark shadow of the future were troubling her.

"But why can't you tell me all?" I protested. "I found you being roughly handled by some cowardly rascal who deserves a horse-whipping, and yet you will tell me absolutely nothing regarding him—nothing, indeed, regarding yourself."

"Because it is not right that I should do so," she replied, in a rather strained voice. "I have others to study beside myself. Even in meeting you like this, just as though we

were lovers, I am running a great and terrible risk—perhaps, indeed, bringing upon you a dire misfortune.”

“ You certainly take a very pessimistic view of things,” I said. “ Why are you so mysterious ? ”

“ If I dared I would tell you everything, because I know that I could trust you,” she said. “ But I confess to you that I dare not—you understand me, and once for all—I dare not ! ”

“ Why not ? ” I inquired, my curiosity increased.

“ Because it would be fatal.”

I was silent, utterly unable to solve the enigma. Surely the adventure was as strange and romantic as any that has occurred to a man in this very prosaic, up-to-date old London of ours. That she was a girl with a curious history I felt assured ; and a tragic history, too. It was written in her face, I felt it in her trembling hand-grasp. Yet, try how I would, I could learn nothing—absolutely nothing.

Again and again we met at various spots in the vicinity of Sydenham and Forest Hill, and walked together through those quiet, dark and often foggy suburban roads. We

discussed a hundred subjects, and her wide knowledge of things surprised me greatly. As to who she was, who were her parents, or what was her place of abode, she flatly refused to satisfy me. Indeed, in our first meeting she had made me promise on my word of honour to make no attempt to follow her. Sometimes I had a suspicion that she was some shop-girl bent upon surrounding herself with mystery, knowing that mystery in a woman is always attractive, but when I reflected calmly, I saw that her manner was unmistakably that of a lady, and that the strange vein of tragedy that seemed to run through all her smart conversation, was the cause of this careful concealment of her identity.

Yet she appeared to enjoy thoroughly the little romance, although she was always apprehensive lest the secret of our clandestine meetings should be discovered. That latter fact confirmed my suspicion of the existence of a jealous lover.

Times without number I returned to the incident which had first made us acquainted, but her reply was usually the same :

“ Ah ! don't speak of him ! Let us forget.”

I would have given a good deal to be aware of the identity of the fellow who, having handled her roughly, fled at my approach. That he was a coward was plain, and that she who chose to be known by the name of Clare, had an object in concealing both his name and his intentions was equally certain.

Once I wondered whether the fellow were actually her husband.

I made the veiled suggestion one damp, misty evening as we were passing down Longton Avenue, in Sydenham, one of our favourite nocturnal promenades, whereat she laughed outright.

"My husband!" she cried, with her musical accent. "Ah! that is indeed droll! No, I have never married—" and she added, with a touch of hardness in her tone, "I shall never marry."

"Never marry!" I cried. "Why not?"

She refused to speak until I had repeated my question several times. Then she answered:

"Because, for me, marriage is utterly impossible. There is an obstacle—a secret obstacle that is, alas! insurmountable."

We were passing beneath a street-lamp and I saw how pale her beautiful face had

become. I took her hand, as I did sometimes, and found it trembling.

I tried to induce her to speak more plainly, and to repose confidence in me, but she steadfastly refused. She was a complete mystery.

All this I had been relating to George Kirkwood in the privacy of my rooms, and, as I have already written down at the opening of this strange chronicle of recent events, he had expressed himself decidedly sceptical regarding her.

He and I had known each other since we were boys, for his father's property in Cheshire joined ours. Old Mr. Kirkwood had been a gentleman farmer, but was ruined by the agricultural depression like hundreds of others, and George had to seek his living in London, with the result that after fifteen years he now occupied a very comfortable and responsible position in one of the best banks in the City.

To endeavour to induce him to alter his theory seemed a useless task, so we went out to my club—the St. James's—and spent the remainder of the evening there.

Next night, having an appointment with my mysterious witch of the suburbs, I alighted

from the train at Lordship Lane Station a little late, and hurried up Sydenham Hill.

Rain had fallen all day, a soaking, steady rain, and the quiet, deserted road, with its big houses at infrequent intervals and high leafless trees, was gloomy and cheerless after the light and movement of the sloppy London streets. Heedless of the silent and dispiriting surroundings, I went forward, toiling up the hill towards the pillar box at the corner of Crescentwood Road, which she had designated as our place of meeting—the same spot opposite St. Mary's Oratory where I had first met her by appointment. On the brow of Sydenham Hill the road winds and becomes more open and rural, indeed it is one of the last remaining rural roads in South London, for the jerry-builder has erected his rows of "desirable residences" around it, but always at a respectable distance, for the owners of property on Sydenham Hill are nothing if not conservative, and still cling to old-world picturesqueness.

I had hurried round the bend of the road-way when through the mist I suddenly heard a cry—almost a shriek—which startled me in the stillness of the night. Then, remembering the incident in the Crystal Palace

grounds, I dashed forward and a few minutes later came in sight of the red-painted pillar box, near which my enchantress was standing.

As she caught sight of me she sprang forward, clutching both my hands in terror. Her countenance was blanched to the lips.

"Look! Look!" she managed to gasp, turning her head slightly behind her. "Look! What shall I do? My God! What shall I do? *I've killed him!*"

Then, to my amazement I saw, lying in the gutter behind the pillar-post, the body of a man.

What followed happened in less time than it takes to relate.

"Save me!" she implored, clinging to me. "Swear to me that you will tell the police nothing. I—I killed him! I confess to you, my friend! Will you not preserve my secret? Do, do, for my sake—for the sake of a defenceless woman—do." And with her terrified face upturned to mine she raised my hand to her lips and kissed it fervently.

So sudden was the tragic incident, and so filled was I with horror at the discovery, that for a moment I stood utterly dum-

founded. Yet ere I could find tongue the sound of approaching footsteps came to us through the night.

"Hark!" she whispered, trembling. "Someone is coming—a constable probably! I saw one up there ten minutes ago. There's not an instant to lose. Promise me that you will tell no one; and then I may escape."

"Clare," I said, in breathless haste, much moved by her earnest entreaty, and seeing I must act with promptness, "I promise to keep this secret of yours. You have my address. Write to me when you are in a place of safety. Fly quickly—before anybody discovers you. Fly!"

"Ah, yes," she whispered hoarsely. "I know you are my friend, my benefactor! I can only repay you by giving you a woman's thanks from a woman's heart. Adieu!"

And almost before I was aware of it she had again raised my hand to her cold white lips and slipped away with light swift footsteps into the darkness.

CHAPTER III

SOME UNPLEASANT QUESTIONS

NEXT moment I realized that I had acted injudiciously.

Ere the light-footed girl had disappeared the burly form of a constable loomed up through the mist, and his voice aroused me to a sense of my responsibility.

"Hulloa, guv'nor," he inquired, "what's the matter 'ere? Your friend's had a glass too much, ain't he?" And he halted before the prostrate man and looked down upon him.

"He is no friend of mine," I responded. "I don't know what's the matter with him. I've only this moment arrived here."

The officer placed his hands on his knees and bent to examine the prostrate figure more closely.

"Why," he exclaimed, "if I'm not very much mistaken, that's the gentleman who passed by with a young lady about ten minutes ago, a-coming from the direction o'

West Hill. Yes, I'm sure 'e is. He looks pretty bad, too. Where's the lady? "

" There's no lady," I said. " But do you recognize him? "

" Certainly I do. Why, it isn't more than ten minutes ago that they passed me. They were talking in some foreign language, I think." And he turned his lantern upon the features of the man lying half in the roadway, revealing his countenance clearly for the first time. He appeared to be about thirty-five, of rather sallow complexion and of Jewish cast, with a well-trimmed brown beard. His hat, a soft brown felt of Homburg type, had fallen off, while his overcoat, half-unbuttoned, revealed that he was in evening dress, wearing a black cravat carefully tied, and on his slim hand sparkled a fine diamond. His face, however, was bloodless, and his wide-open eyes stared wildly into space.

" Good heavens, sir! " exclaimed the constable, as he bent and touched the blanched countenance, " why, I do believe the gentleman's dead! "

" It certainly looks very suspiciously like it," I answered, still taking careful observation of the appearance of the unknown man.

There was no blood or trace of foul play. Only the position in which he was lying, the pallor of his cheeks and the stony look in the eyes revealed to the officer the tragic truth.

The confession of the woman I knew as Clare made it clear to me who was the culprit, but having so foolishly pledged myself to secrecy, I was compelled to remain silent. Even the most prosaic of men are mostly idiots where a woman is concerned, and I was no exception even after years of dancing attendance upon the beauties of half-a-dozen capitals. Perfume and frou-frou had been my constant atmosphere till then, and I, like so many others before me, had believed myself utterly invulnerable by the glance of any woman, were she Helen of Troy herself. But all men are fools and all women diplomats. The older and more experienced the man, the greater the fool. I know I ought never to have become accessory to the crime, yet I can only declare that the woman had entirely captivated me, and at the moment of her earnest appeal for protection I had no idea of the complication consequent on granting it.

Yet having allowed her to escape, I quickly

gathered my wits together in order that I might not be suspected of the crime.

That the man was dead seemed undoubted, but as to the cause of death there was nothing whatever to show.

"There's a bit of mystery here, sir," the constable remarked, after a critical examination of the body. "I'd better call assistance," and placing his whistle to his lips he blew long and shrilly, then listened for an answering note. The latter was not long in coming, for through the wet, misty night came the sound of a whistle in the same key, and within a minute or two a colleague appeared in breathless haste, and to him the situation was briefly explained.

"There was a lady with 'im," the first officer added, "a young and very pretty lady, dressed in black."

"Would you recognize her again?" I inquired, eagerly.

"Of course I should, sir. There ain't many young ladies as pretty as 'er about Sydenham, I can tell yer."

My heart sank within me. Clare had been seen, and her beauty might perhaps betray her when inquiries were made into the mysterious affair.

Together we moved the body in order to ascertain if any wound were perceptible, but found none. Neither man appeared to entertain any suspicion of my connection with the affair, although I had noticed that the second man had eyed me keenly when told the facts.

"You'd better stay 'ere, Palmer," the first man suggested. "I'll go round to the station with this gentleman and report."

"I prefer to remain also," I exclaimed. "I would like to meet your inspector here, on the spot."

"Very well, sir," he replied agreeably, and hurried away, leaving me with the young constable whom he had addressed as Palmer.

The postman returning from his "walk" passed us, and noticing the man lying between us, came to inquire what was the matter.

"Oh, he's only been took bad," the officer replied. "An epileptic fit or something of that sort. We've just sent for the ambulance."

"More likely booze," observed the letter-carrier bluntly, and then hurried on his way.

"It doesn't do to arouse public interest," remarked my companion philosophically.

"We have strict orders not to tell anything. In a case like this we don't want a crowd."

"Well," I said, "in this quiet neighbourhood you're scarcely likely to get one."

"There's no accounting for crowds," he declared. "They'd collect in the middle of a field. It's marvellous where all the people come from as soon as one of us makes an arrest. They seem to spring up from the ground."

"This case is a profound mystery," I observed, disregarding the man's philosophy. "The other constable says he saw him alive and well ten minutes before I discovered him dead. It seems almost incredible."

"He may have died from heart disease, I had a case rather similar when I was stationed at Stepney last year. The man was a sailor out for a walk with his girl, and he went off quite sudden and fell down dead."

I, who knew the truth, made no response, and our subsequent conversation was merely desultory until the arrival of the inspector in charge of two constables with the ambulance. By means of the latter the unknown man was conveyed to the police station. Walking beside the inspector and traversing

several quiet by-roads, it was not long before we ascended some steps, and I found myself in the bare, but well-warmed charge-room, where a sergeant was scribbling in a book with a scratchy pen.

The divisional surgeon, a short, round-faced man in gold spectacles, was called by telephone, and, with the inspector, I was present when he made his examination.

The unknown man had been carried on the stretcher into the charge-room, and there lay beneath the hissing gas-jets with their wire globes, the staring, sightless eyes decently covered by a red handkerchief placed there by the constable Palmer.

"Quite dead," was the fussy doctor's pronouncement. "He must have died half an hour ago. Suddenly, too, by all appearances."

"Foul play, do you think, sir?" inquired the inspector.

"I really can't say. There's no evidence of it. There'll have to be a post-mortem. You had better warn the coroner in the morning, and I'll make an appointment with Doctor Morgan to help me. In all probability we shall find it due to heart disease. Has he been identified?"

"No, sir; we haven't searched him yet." Then, addressing the sergeant standing near, he added: "You'd better go through his pockets, Vail. We may find out who his friends are."

The surgeon was anxious to know the circumstances in which the dead man had been discovered, and the inspector referred him to me.

"I am an utter stranger," I replied. "I merely came upon the unfortunate man lying half in the roadway, and almost at the same instant the constable on the beat reached the spot."

"But the men say something about a lady who accompanied him," the inspector remarked, looking me straight in the face with a pair of kindly blue eyes that betokened both geniality and intelligence.

"Yes," I said, "I was told that he was seen only ten minutes before with a lady." But I did not make mention of having met the lady in question. I was trusting to good fortune to conceal the fact.

The two constables first on the scene were standing at the desk dictating their report to the station-sergeant, who wrote it down in that big chronicle of events which is ever

open at the stations of the Metropolitan Police. The smallest circumstances coming under the notice of the constables on their beats, are reported when they come off duty and written down there for future reference.

"Oh!" exclaimed the inspector, turning to me suddenly, after a whispered word from P.C. Palmer, "you haven't given us your name, sir."

In response I pulled out my case, and handed him my card.

Now I must here admit that the card did not bear my real name. Long ago, for purposes connected with inquiries I had on hand, I had been forced to adopt a second name, for in certain quarters the name of Jardine was rather too well known, and it was therefore of advantage to have an alias. It was a card bearing that alias, the name of "Bernard Barry, Junior Conservative Club," that I handed to the inspector.

"And your private address?" he asked.

"I live in Paris," I responded. "My address is 102, Rue Lafayette."

Both the doctor and the police officer looked at me with some curiosity. They were evidently not expecting such a reply. But it was true that I did occupy rooms

in Paris at the address given, and was there known as Monsieur Barry. My engagements often took me to the French capital, and to be known there in my proper name would be fatal to the efforts I was sometimes compelled to make in order to gain possession of diplomatic secrets. By reason of long residence in France and of my cosmopolitan birth, I always passed as a Frenchman on the other side of the Channel, for I found that to do so was in many ways advantageous. Besides, to those with whom I mixed in the Gay City I was as anti-English as the most rabid of them, and read my *Patrie* and my *Libre Parole* with as great avidity as the most pronounced Anglophobe.

In France I had never been suspected of spying, but was believed to be far too good a Frenchman.

My true position I was always compelled to conceal. In Berlin, Petersburg, and Rome I had been known as Captain Jardine; British Military Attaché, but in Paris and certain other cities I had always gone under the guise of the Frenchman, Monsieur Bernard Barry, representative of the Maison Galli; the great silk manufacturers of Lyons.

I saw myself mixed up with an ugly affair, therefore I did not intend to betray my real name, for the police meant the press, and the press publicity.

CHAPTER IV

THE MYSTERIOUS MR. WHITE

SERGEANT VAIL, having searched the dead man's pockets, handed to his inspector several letters, a gold watch and chain, a well-worn silver-mounted wallet, a tiny piece of pearl, round, pointed and twisted, and three pounds or so in gold, silver and coppers.

All these he placed upon the desk vacated by the scribbling sergeant, and, assisted by the surgeon, we examined them.

"Sergeant Vail," exclaimed the inspector, "see that the body is taken to the mortuary. Afterwards, send out on the wire a description of the lady who was seen with him. It may be of advantage to the C. I. D."

Well used as I was—perhaps more so than the police-inspector—to the examination of documents, the letters were the first to attract my attention.

There were four, one addressed to Henry

White, Esquire, Hotel Victoria, Northumberland Avenue, London.

His appearance was that of an Italian of the South, notwithstanding his English name, and the query which presented itself to me, was whether the man whom I had found dead in that suburban road, was the same who had attacked my love and escaped at my approach. Somehow I felt convinced that the identity was the same. We all of us have, at certain times, a curious inexplicable intuition of the truth, and especially so where the great turning-points of our lives are concerned. Thus it was with myself. I felt convinced that this man, whose body had been conveyed away to await a post-mortem, was the person of whom my love had lived in deadly fear. She had admitted to me that she had killed him—and surely not without some very strong motive.

And so I bent over the shoulder of the inspector to examine the documentary evidence of the dead man's identity.

The first was a letter written by a woman—in French, a language of which the estimable police official was ignorant.

I read the first page while he and the doctor examined it in dismay. It was an

ordinary letter, regretting that the writer had received no news, and asking for an appointment.

"The fellow seems to have been a foreigner," remarked the inspector. "I can't read this stuff, can you, sir?" he asked the surgeon.

The latter made a futile attempt, and it was then referred to me.

I gave them a complete translation, not only of that letter, but of the others, all of them being of the greatest interest to myself.

They were dated six months before from the Hôtel Louvre et Paix, at Marseilles—a hotel I knew well—and were evidently the communications of a woman who had something of importance to convey to the addressee—a woman who simply signed herself with the single initial "F."

One of them, translated into English, ran as follows:—

"If you care to run such risks, you have only yourself to blame. I have been your friend too long. You may follow me to London as you threaten, but I do not fear you.—F."

Another, written in pencil upon the hotel notepaper, said:

“ I am just leaving for Ventimiglia. If you attempt to follow me, it will be at your own peril.—F.”

The third, rather more friendly, read :

“ If you can make it convenient to meet me here at two o'clock this afternoon I shall be glad, as I have something of great importance to tell you. Your ship does not leave for Corsica till 8 p.m., therefore you have plenty of time. I trust to your secrecy in this. Remember all that I have at stake, good name, honour, life—everything. Upon you all depends.—F.”

The last was on a dirty scrap of paper, though still dated from Marseilles. It contained only a few words, as follows :

“ You are a coward. There was no risk in the affair. The Englishman had no friends. You missed the great chance of your life. He had half a million francs in negotiable securities with him. I am disgusted, and so is P. You had better adopt an honest means of livelihood. It would suit you better.—F.”

The letters certainly pointed to the conclusion that the dead man was something of an adventurer. I glanced through them, and because of the address I had given in Paris was forced to translate them for the benefit of my companions.

"Well," remarked the surgeon, "he seems to have been a rather suspicious person. That last letter appears as though from an accomplice."

"Yes," remarked the inspector thoughtfully.

I was wondering if the woman who signed herself with the initial "F." could actually be my sweet-faced charmer in black. She had lived abroad undoubtedly, and these letters were those of some woman who knew French well and was an intimate correspondent of the unidentified Mr. White.

"Suspicious!" snorted the inspector. "Very suspicious! I wonder what else we have here?" And he turned over the papers and articles lying before him. "It seems that although a foreigner he went under an English name. Perhaps they'll know something of him at the hotel."

The wallet contained but little of note, save some cards bearing the name "Mr.

Henry White," and two or three foreign hotel bills which showed that within the past few months the dead man had been travelling in Austria and Servia. The note-book within contained but one thing, a rough pencil design, occupying several pages, of what appeared to be a map of certain streets, each being carefully numbered. We searched for a key to the strange design, but could find none. The plan seemed to be continued from one page to another, and had all the appearance of having been made surreptitiously on the spot.

"Perhaps he was an architect, or something of that sort," the inspector suggested, but I was too well versed in the preparation of secret plans, not to recognize that we had discovered a fact which threw grave suspicion upon the real profession of the deceased. It seemed very much as though he were a foreign spy.

Again, the piece of twisted pearl puzzled both doctor and inspector. It was about two inches in length, as thick as a penholder, tapering to a point, and polished by being carried for years in the pocket. To my two companions its discovery conveyed nothing, but the sight of it was sufficient to

show me that the dead man had been a superstitious person, and had carried it believing in its potency to avert the Evil Eye. The Tuscans and Neapolitans, male and female, carry pieces of coral, bone or pearl of that shape ; hence it seemed to me that the real nationality of Mr. White was Italian.

But was the mysterious woman who signed herself " F." and who so openly expressed her disgust at his failure to secure half a million francs from the unnamed Englishman, actually she whom I knew as Clare ? Her terrible confession, " I've killed him ! " rang in my ears even as I stood with those two puzzled men. Her white haggard face was still before me, and I felt her kiss upon my hand.

Ah ! the memory of that eventful night will never pass from me ! Even as I write I am living it all over again, hour to hour ; all the doubt, all the fear, all the wild excitement and keen interest come back to me, for the mystery was one with a thousand possible explanations and yet without a single actual one.

Even though my love had confessed to the crime, I somehow could not believe it. She was by no means of that type which I asso-

ciated with murder. So calm, sweet-mannered, frank in conversation, though always concealing her identity, her gestures and her grace were as ingenuous as those of a child. That she was a lady had always been apparent. Some bitter sorrow weighed upon her I knew quite well, but she was too patient and too forbearing to so far resent an injury as to take even an enemy's life.

Times upon times, when strolling about those deserted roads in Sydenham and Dulwich, she had sighed heavily as though weighed down by oppression, but to me she would give no explanation of her unhappiness, nor would she let me for one moment become her confidant. Always fearful lest our clandestine meetings should be discovered ; always on the alert lest we should meet any person acquainted with her, or lest the secret of our acquaintance should become known ; she was nevertheless of a sweet and charming character, so thoroughly fresh, so utterly unconventional, and yet so modest that to me she stood peerless above all other women, one apart, to be admired, to be loved. Although her nature was lovable and affectionate, yet I was reluctantly compelled to admit that she had never given me cause to

believe that she reciprocated my feelings. She had called me her "devoted friend" many times ; but by force of some mysterious circumstances, of which I now seemed to be on the point of discovery, love between us was forbidden.

I had promised to shield her from the consequences of her crime, and she had fled. Would she reveal her hiding-place to me ? That was the great question which now occupied all my thought. Would she ever again meet me ? Would she confess to me the truth ?

The doctor and the inspector were talking together, but I heard them not. My mind was too full of the events of the past three months, and—shall I admit it?—of the warning given me by George Kirkwood.

Perhaps, after all, she was actually married, and the dead man might have been her undesirable husband ! If that were really the case, I had surely been sadly tricked.

The inspector, turning to me again, told me that I should be wanted at the inquest, and inquired where I could be found in London. That question was a rather disconcerting one, but without betraying the least concern I gave my proper address in

Great Russell Street, resolving to arrange with my urbane landlady that if any one called to see "Mr. Barry," he should be directed to my rooms.

The officer gathered together the contents of the dead man's pockets and placed them in a drawer; then, after the spectacled surgeon had wished us both good-night and left, he commenced to chat with me confidentially.

"Now what's your private opinion of the affair, sir?" he asked. "I noticed by the way you read them letters that you'd formed some theory."

"I hold no theory," I replied. "The man is dead, but he may have died suddenly from natural causes."

"But the lady who accompanied him?" the officer remarked dubiously. "You've heard what the constable reports?"

"Ah, that's not my affair," I responded. "If he's been murdered, then it is for Scotland Yard to get at the truth."

"Well, our first duty is to establish his identity. I shall wire to headquarters, and they'll make inquiry at the Hotel Victoria. According to them letters he seems to have been a queerish character. Besides, White

ain't a foreign name. He must have adopted an English name for some purpose or other. He was a foreigner, don't you think so?"

"Undoubtedly," I said. "From the South—Italian, Greek or Turk, I should say."

"He wore a splendid ring. Did you notice it?"

I had noticed it. The gem was a magnificent one, and beneath the flaring gas-jets of the charge-room it had dazzled all our eyes.

As a rule the Metropolitan Police are an intelligent body of men, especially the inspectors, but they often fail because of being compelled to carry out their work by strict rule. Unlike the Continental police, they are held to certain regulations which often in the early stages of an inquiry nullify any attempt at the discovery of the truth. My friend of Sydenham, if invested with similar powers to the French police, might have detained me, put me on oath, cross-questioned me and obtained from me the truth of my knowledge of the crime. But having no power to do so, he merely chatted for a quarter of an hour, apparently with the object of discovering what was my profession, and at length wished me adieu, telling me that

I should receive in due course at Great Russell Street a summons to attend the coroner's inquiry.

I was fortunate in catching the last train from Lordship Lane Station to Ludgate Hill, but before arriving in the City resolved to pursue my own inquiries into the remarkable affair. So with that object I took a cab to the Hotel Victoria, and in the reception-bureau found the head clerk, who was fortunately very well known to me.

"Good evening, Burton," I said, "have you a Mr. Henry White staying here?"

"Henry White?" he repeated; "yes, Captain Jardine, I think so." And he referred to the big leather-bound register in which the visitors had inscribed their names.

I gave my card—the genuine one this time—and he scribbled a number on it and handed it to one of the pages, who went upstairs to the room indicated.

Some people who were obtaining their keys left the office, and when we were alone I bent over the counter and said confidentially:

"I'm making some inquiries regarding this Henry White. Tell me what you know of

him. You'll recollect the Hammond affair when you were at the 'Grand' at Nice?"

He looked me straight in the face for a moment, then, recalling the incident to his recollection and knowing me to be a Government agent, he replied in a low tone:

"The gentleman you mention is, I fancy, a crook, sir. Of course that's only my private opinion. He's been here about a week. One day out there in the hall I overheard a conversation in French between him and a smart young lady who visited him. It was what he said that aroused my suspicions. But then, of course, I may be prejudiced against coloured men."

"Coloured men!" I exclaimed. "Is this White a man of colour?"

"Certainly. A Persian, I believe."

"And the lady?"

"Oh, she's a foreigner, I fancy—white and exceedingly pretty. She comes to see him almost every day, and gives a card bearing the name of Stanway—Clare Stanway."

"Stanway! Stanway!"

The page returned with my card upon his salver to announce that the gentleman I wanted was not in.

"Are you quite certain that Mr. Henry

White is a gentleman of colour?" I asked the hotel clerk.

"Most decidedly. How he got his English name I don't know."

"But there are degrees of colour—a dark complexion do you mean?"

"Well, he isn't a negro. As I've said before, I put him down as a Persian—or perhaps of other Oriental origin."

"And the lady? Do you happen to know anything about her?"

"Nothing," was my friend's candid reply. "Girls, I've heard say, often fall in love with coloured men, and it has struck me from my observations out in the hall that she was running after the fellow. From this office we see queer things sometimes, you know. Yet somehow her face has struck me as familiar from the very first. She's unusually good-looking, and such a countenance once seen is not easily forgotten. Nevertheless, for the life of me I can't recall where I've seen it before."

"Well," I remarked. "the man has been found dead to-night, and his body is at the mortuary down at Sydenham."

"Found dead!" he exclaimed, in surprise. "That's queer, isn't it? But we

don't want any scandal in the hotel," he added, with a keen eye to the interests of the company who were his employers. "If what you say is correct, we'd better go up to his room and have a glance through his things. Don't you think so?"

"Most certainly," I said eagerly. "The police may be here at any moment, therefore it will be best to lose no time."

"The fellow's a crook—I'm sure of it," Burton said; "but come along. Boy, give me the key of eight eleven."

And together we ascended in the lift to search the dead man's room.

CHAPTER V

THE NAME OF STANWAY

WE found nothing—absolutely nothing of importance.

The only luggage consisted of a big leather portmanteau, much worn and battered, and this merely contained articles of unmarked apparel. There was no single scrap of writing; only an envelope with three ten-pound notes within, and some visiting cards of "Mr. Henry White," similar to those in the dead man's pocket.

The hotel servants knew nothing. Burton was a discreet person who could read his clients at a glance, and gauge at once whether they desired rooms on the second floor or on the seventh. It takes a diplomat to be a smart hotel clerk in those colossal hostelries in London, where there is life and movement for twenty hours out of every twenty-four.

Just as we had finished our investigation, the head porter, a tall person resplendent in gold lace, appeared at the door of the room and introduced his companion, a stout, red-faced little man, as:

"A gentleman from Scotland Yard, Mr. Burton. He wishes to see you."

The gentleman in question, who gave his name as Inspector Hodder, of the Criminal Investigation Department, at once explained that he had called on account of a telegram they had received from Sydenham regarding a man found dead there, and who, it appeared, had been a visitor at the hotel.

In response, Burton explained who I was, and that we had been searching the room.

"Then you are a witness in the case!" the detective exclaimed in surprise turning to me. "It seems you've forestalled us in investigating, at any rate."

I laughed at his ill-concealed chagrin.

"Well, I don't suppose I'm very much to blame," I said; "you would have done the same yourself. I found the poor fellow dead, and naturally I'm curious to solve the mystery."

"H'm," grunted the red-faced man in dissatisfaction, "I think it would have been better if you'd left the whole matter to us. It's astonishing, though, how many people believe themselves to be able investigators of crime."

I did not reply. At Scotland Yard, I was well known to the Chief Commissioner and two or three higher officials, but from the rank and file of the Criminal Investigation Department my real calling, that of secret agent of the Government, was always concealed. So I allowed him to grumble to his heart's content. I was waiting for him to go a little further into the tragic occurrence.

"You knew this man, White—eh?" he asked presently of Burton, after he had gone through the dead man's belongings.

"I knew a coloured man of that name, who occupied this room," was his reply.

"A coloured man!" exclaimed the detective in surprise, "but the dead man was

apparently an Englishman," and he took from his pocket the official telegram, on the flimsy paper headed "Metropolitan Police," and re-read the description. "No," he added, "there must be some mistake. The deceased was certainly not a man of colour."

"Well, the Henry White who had this room certainly was."

"What was his nationality?"

"Difficult to say. Probably he was a Persian. His lips were not of the nigger type. When he talked he had something of the American drawl. Coloured men are never welcome guests in hotels, for the Americans detest their society—they call them niggers—yet we can't turn them away, you know."

"But was this man really a nigger?" queried the detective.

"If you don't believe my statement, you'd better ask some of the servants," was Burton's reply.

Then, turning to the head porter, he asked:

"Do you know the coloured gentleman who was often met in the hall by a very pretty girl? He was a bit of a dandy, and wore a big diamond ring. He used to wear a soft, light-brown, felt hat and grey overcoat."

"Certainly, sir. He spoke to me once

or twice in the hall. I took his baggage in when he arrived."

"How did he come?"

"On a four-wheeler—from the docks. I recollect that the cabman overcharged him pretty stiffly."

"Had he money, do you think?"

"He gave me half-a-sovereign one day, so I suppose he had."

"And this lady who visited him? She could probably tell us something."

To this question Burton replied:

"I think she was a foreigner. At least she spoke with just a slight accent. She was extremely pretty, with dark eyes and brown hair, and gave the name of Stanway."

"H'm! Rather uncommon name. Perhaps we may find her. If she doesn't know of his death, she may call again. I'll place a man on duty here, in case she calls, and if there are any letters or telegrams, please hand them over to him. If there should be any callers, you might give my man the tip."

"Of course." Burton was used to having a detective about the hotel. More than once had undesirable persons made the place their headquarters, and the police had kept a watchful eye upon their movements. There

are American crooks in most of the big London hotels during the season—thieves who prey upon the ignorance of their fellow-guests, card-sharpers or swindlers engaged in some coup in the City. Hotel hall-porters can tell some queer stories when they choose. They can sum up their visitors as quickly and as accurately as the smartest man who ever emerged from New Scotland Yard.

My position was both serious and insecure.

Aware of the identity of the assassin, yet bound to silence by the promise I had so rashly made to her. I knew not who or what she was, only that her face, her manner, her grace had entirely fascinated me. Alas! like many another man, perhaps, I had been as wax in her tiny white hands. Her appeal had melted me. She had thrown herself, her life, her honour upon my pity, and I had granted her appeal. I alone held the secret of the assassination of this mysterious person, White, who was believed to be not only a criminal but a man of colour.

I sat upon the edge of the bed listening to the chatter between the detective and the hotel clerk. It was the former's duty to learn what he could, and the duty of the latter to say nothing. Hotels always try to hide

the delinquencies of their clients, for scandal in an hotel spells ruin. Even the newspapers in reporting a suicide at an hotel always omit to state the name, for fear of prejudicing it in the eyes of the public.

The manager, who had been out, presently returned, and in his office was held a consultation over the affair. He, of course, knew nothing of the mysterious Mr. White, and was unaware even of his presence in the hotel. When eight hundred persons sleep beneath the same roof every night, it is impossible for the manager to be acquainted with each of them.

So, after a long interview, Inspector Hodder left, first, however, having given instructions to the head porter and promising to place a man on duty there.

At midnight I was back in my sombre rooms in Great Russell Street, seated in my old arm-chair, and pondering over the strange drama in which I had played so leading a part. In the daily life of a secret agent there is a good deal of peril and considerable excitement, but never had a mystery so preyed upon my mind as the one which now perplexed me.

Who was Clare ?

That was the chief point upon which the whole enigma depended. That she had visited this man White and chatted to him in the big hall of the hotel was plain by Burton's description. She had even given the same name by which I knew her, and that very fact caused me to fear that she might be traced by the police. I had certainly given her my word of secrecy, but her indiscretion would most probably be the cause of her undoing.

Again, was the man an Oriental, or was he a white man? Certainly the man I found lying there behind the pillar-post was as fair of complexion as myself. Yet the man Henry White, who was a guest at the "Victoria," was most certainly a man of colour!

Now when a man has been warned about a woman and has not heeded, he usually condemns himself as a fool. In the silent watches of the night, as I sat by my own fireside, thinking, I reflected upon George Kirkwood's words. Had he not suggested that she might, after all, be an adventuress? And it seemed very much as though what he had said were true.

With that method of logical argument which I had acquired by the exercise of my pro-

fession through many years, I carefully reviewed each fact as it had occurred from that memorable evening when I first met Clare in the train, and each circumstance, combined with her cautious reticence, seemed to confirm George's suspicions. Therefore, before I finally turned in, I was forced to come to the unwelcome and unsatisfactory conclusion that I, most confirmed of bachelors and most hardened of lovers, had been "had" by a pretty woman.

The worst feature of the whole affair was that, according to law, I was an accessory after the fact. A man had been murdered, and I had sworn to keep the identity of the murderess a secret. My position, therefore, was anything but secure.

In the vicinity of the spot where I had met Clare by appointment, there were houses, and for aught I knew some one had watched our meeting. The evidence of some onlooker might rise up against me, if I denied, on oath, all knowledge of the truth. I dreaded the ordeal that I should be compelled to pass through at the inquest; and further, I dreaded George Kirkwood, who knew that I was in the habit of meeting my love at Sydenham, and would at once jump to the con-

clusion that she had been implicated in the crime.

If you, my reader, to whom I now confide this curious episode of an eventful and wandering life, will place yourself for a single moment in my position, you will see how insecure it was and how utterly I was hemmed in by the perils of discovery.

That night I slept but little, and when my man brought my letters in the morning, a further complication awaited me.

One envelope bore a familiar crest, and within were a few brief lines, in a well-known, scrawly hand, asking me to meet the writer at his private house, at noon, that day. The initial with which the note was signed was that of the Most Noble the Marquess of Glinton, His Majesty's Foreign Secretary. I knew well that it meant another mission abroad and that I should be compelled to bid farewell to my comfortable quarters for another indefinite period.

I sighed, for I was utterly weary of wandering—very weary.

But the secret agent, to serve his country faithfully and well, must never tire. His calling is, after all, quite as honourable as that of attaché, although he makes his in-

quiries in secret, and supplies the information to the Foreign Office by ways many and devious.

Lord Glinton's town house was one of the most sombre in that most severely aristocratic quadrangle, Berkeley Square. The pair of big iron extinguishers attached to the black railings, on either side of the steps, were used a century ago by linkmen to put out their torches, and the exterior of the place, as well as the interior, was almost the same as it had been a hundred and fifty years ago.

Hoyle, his lordship's faithful old servitor, ushered me along the great silent hall and up the wide flight of stairs to a door on the first floor, at which he rapped respectfully. A low grunt from within was the response, and, opening the door, I entered the Foreign Secretary's private sanctum, a small old-fashioned room, in the centre of which there sat, at a big writing-table, a thin, white-haired, sharp-featured old gentleman, who gave me one keen glance across the row of books separating us and exclaimed, in his quick, impatient way:

"You're three minutes late, Jardine. Sit down here,—beside the table. I must finish this despatch before I talk to you."

Hoyle left, closing the door silently, and I seated myself, as invited. I was used to all the great statesman's idiosyncrasies, for he was an eccentric man in private life, peevish; irritable and something of a misanthrope. According to Burke, his age was sixty-nine; and for nigh forty years he had taken an active part in the political life of England. The honour of the Garter had been bestowed upon him by Queen Victoria, and in addition to being a Privy Councillor, he was a Knight of St. Patrick, an Honorary LL.D. of Cambridge, and a Fellow of the Royal Society. He had served under Lord Salisbury in half-a-dozen administrations, and in each office had distinguished himself by his calm foresight, by his great integrity and by his remarkable grasp of detail. For clever oratory he almost equalled the genius of Gladstone; for his wide knowledge of foreign affairs and his diplomatic instinct he had more than once been classed with Palmerston.

To the world he was an enigma; to the staff of the Foreign Office, a terror. So closely had he studied his department that he knew the duties of those of every grade, from second-class clerk up to permanent secretary, and woe betide any man who

shirked his work. Outwardly he was a most austere gentleman. He gave no praise and seldom made any comment, save to ridicule or condemn. He never entertained, and for twenty years no woman had been known to set foot in the great, gloomy house. Yet there were a few—a very few—who knew him intimately, myself amongst them, who were well aware that beneath that outward harshness there beat a heart easily moved to compassion, a heart soured by the one bitter grief that, years ago, had so suddenly changed the current of his life.

Through all the years I had been in the service of the Foreign Office, I do not recollect ever having received any word of approbation from him, save on one occasion ; yet many were the little kindnesses I had received at his hands, and often, by his forethought, had I been saved annoyance and even the peril which ever surrounds those who practise my dangerous profession.

It was an open secret that there was some strange romance connected with Lord Ginton's life, and more than once had I seen this hinted at in *M.A.P.* and other gossip journals. But the facts suggested were entirely wrong.

I knew the truth, and it was owing to this knowledge that, in addition to being a secret agent of the British Government, I was an intimate friend of His Majesty's Foreign Secretary, the greatest among the British statesmen of to-day.

CHAPTER VI

DUE SOUTH

AFTER the final flourish of a signature, the scratchy quill was silent. Then the old man raised his eyes, sighed, and fixed his keen dark eyes upon me seriously, saying in his thin, hoarse voice:

"Jardine, I called you here to-day to tell you a secret, and to seek your assistance," and, leaning back in his padded chair, he placed his thin fore-fingers and thumbs together, his usual habit when about to enter upon serious consultation.

The Ambassadors of the Powers accredited to the Court of St. James and members of the Cabinet knew that attitude well, and were fully aware that when he assumed it all argument was useless. The

placing together of the fingers and thumbs showed that the Minister had made up his mind.

"First," he said, "read that!" and he handed across to me a despatch from Lord Clancare, British Ambassador in Rome, which, although written in cipher, had the decipher pencilled underneath, in the Minister's own hand. It was a confidential communication from our Embassy in Italy to the Marquess himself, and I had not read half a dozen lines before I gathered that it contained news of the most extreme importance. The crossed despatches, under flying seal, of which this was one, are seen by no other eye than that of the Foreign Secretary himself and the Sovereign, save on occasion like the present, when my aid was sought.

I read carefully to the end and then handed it back across the table, saying—

"The affair appears serious."

"Serious!" he echoed, opening his eyes, "I should think it was. Durrant brought this through from Rome last night, and I sent you a line at once. As I view the affair, it is most serious. Clancare asks for telegraphic instructions, but what instructions

can I possibly give? As far as I see, our hands are tied—utterly tied!”

I allowed him to go on. It was not within my province to offer advice to a statesman of his acumen and experience.

“You see our position?” he continued gravely. “Hitherto we’ve been on the most friendly terms with Italy, and now, just as I foresaw must happen, matters have become reversed. France has courted Italy’s favour, and is on the point of obtaining it. If she does, then farewell to our over-rated power in the Mediterranean!”

“The outcome of that insult to Italy, a year ago, as I suppose,” I remarked.

“Of course,” he cried impatiently, snapping his fingers. “You know what occurred—the very worst thing that could happen for us. An English Roman Catholic pilgrimage goes to Rome, headed by an English peer. They are entertained by the Pope, and the leader of the pilgrimage, in order to please His Holiness, allows himself to be carried away by religious fervour. He makes a speech at the Vatican, and in an injudicious moment expresses the sentiment which is but natural, namely, the hope that the temporal power of the Pope may be restored in Rome. Next

day Europe is aflame. The Italian journals, with one accord, declare it to be an insult to their Sovereign, and in their ignorance believe that an English peer and ex-Minister must have had some official authority for such a statement. Clancare went at once to the Italian Foreign Minister, Vizardelli, at my order, and pointed out that the opinion expressed was a private one, and entirely opposed to that of the British Government. But public opinion in Italy was, alas! inflamed, and the Press, already slightly Anglophobe, with the rest of the Continental journals, immediately broke forth openly and declared that the friendship of England was a false one. Here you see," and he opened a big scrap-book at his elbow, "I have preserved the comments of the *Tribuna*, the *Secolo*, the *Fieramosca*, the *Nazione*, the *Popolo Romano*, and all the rest of them. That was over a year ago, but the estrangement caused by that unfortunate speech has slowly grown, until we now have the result as reported by Clancare."

"But surely a defensive alliance against us, in the Mediterranean, has not yet been formed between France and Italy, as his Excellency seems to fear?"

"Ah, that's the question!" replied the grey-faced old man, taking up his quill again and toying with it thoughtfully; "I've feared it all along; ever since that wave of indignation swept across Italy. Our friends in Paris have been for years courting Italy's favour, and, having been repulsed each time, they altered their tactics and built a line of threatening forts across their Alpine frontier. Italy knows well enough, that poor and strangled as she is by the horde of thieving politicians, she would stand no chance against France, if it were not for our assistance on the sea. Now that she believes England ready to betray her—and it is only quite natural, after that foolish eulogy of His Holiness—she is, of course, only too ready to make terms with her natural enemy, France."

"Exactly," I said. "It only stands to reason that Italy will seek the best friend she can."

"We've been her best friend always. It has been my policy to protect her ever since the unification, yet our Catholic friend on the stump in ten minutes upset all our diplomacy of the past twenty years," and he passed his thin hand across his brow, sighing wearily.

He was a very early riser, and although

it was only noon, he had probably already been six hours or so seated at that table, deeply engaged in directing the foreign policy of the Empire. The name of Glinton was assuredly synonymous with high intelligence, alertness and untiring activity.

"Your lordship's apprehensions are certainly grave ones," I remarked.

"Yes," he said impatiently, "I have foreseen this a long time, Jardine. I did not like that invitation sent by France to the Italian fleet to visit Toulon. It meant, of course, a *rapprochement*. Clancare in his despatches reported that the feeling in Ministerial circles in Rome, was decidedly tending towards an agreement with France, and that it would most probably be in the form of a secret defensive treaty."

"Then you suspect, as Lord Clancare fears, that there may be a secret treaty already in existence?"

"If not already in existence, it is, I have no doubt, already drafted."

"And when signed it will mean that the balance of power in the Mediterranean is altered, and that we shall no longer be able to command that sea?"

"You follow me quite accurately," he

said approvingly; "I have always placed the most implicit confidence in you, Jardine, and in this affair we sadly need your help."

"In what way?"

"You must go to Rome at once—to-night—and find out what negotiations are in progress. Clancare and the staff have tried and utterly failed. Vizardelli is as close as an oyster, and the Ministry are keeping the whole affair a profound secret for fear of openly offending us. France, too, has evidently impressed upon the Italian Foreign Minister the necessity of silence. Hence I fear that your inquiries will be very difficult."

I smiled.

"Not more difficult than some others with which your lordship has entrusted me," I observed.

"You quite understand the situation?" he pointed out. "If we know the exact terms of the draft agreement, we may be able to outbid our French neighbours by offering a more solid and lasting guarantee. That is my intention. It only remains for you to discover the truth. You are the only man able to do it, therefore I have sought your aid, and if you are successful you will cer-

tainly deserve the thanks of the Cabinet and the country."

"Spies can never receive thanks," I said smiling.

"Spies! I hate the word, Jardine," the old man cried. "Call yourself a secret agent; it sounds so much better," and for the first time his thin features relaxed slightly into the semblance of a smile. "By the way," he added, "where shall you stay?"

"At the 'Russie,'" I answered. "I always put up there, when in Rome. They know me there as Francis Vesey."

The Minister jotted down the name and address, saying:

"I shall write to you in cipher, and you had better address your replies here, and not to the Foreign Office. Address the envelope to Hoyle, and inclose the despatch addressed to me. If you address direct to me the Italian post office will, in all probability, tamper with the letter. I shall keep you posted in all my negotiations with the Baron Giannini, the Italian Ambassador here. And," he added, as an afterthought, "you might tell Lord Clancare from me that he is to act entirely at his own discretion. He will understand. Go, and good luck go with you!"

"I hope so," I laughed. "A spy's life is never of the safest."

"Ah, I know, Jardine, I know!" exclaimed the old statesman. "I often fear for your personal safety. If you were discovered it would mean a life sentence in a fortress for you, and, as you know, I should be utterly powerless to extricate you. England cannot countenance spies, even though she is compelled, in these days, to employ fearless, adventure-loving men like yourself, who daily, nay hourly, carry both liberty and life in your hand."

"I know I have your lordship's good wishes for my safety," I said. "Misfortune may befall any man."

"Not only have you my good wishes, Jardine," said the Marquess. "but His Majesty himself is well aware of your work, and is personally interested in it. I have more than once mentioned to him the debt the country owes to you."

"Then I am more than paid for the risks I sometimes run," I said, much gratified. "You may rest assured that if, at any time, I should by mischance fall into the hands of the foreign police, my lips will be sealed, whatever may be the inducement offered to me to open them."

"I trust in you, Jardine," said the old Marquess, rising and offering me his thin, bony hand in kindly farewell, "but preserve the utmost caution in order that such a catastrophe may not occur. You might have some documents on you—my letters or instructions even—and such a revelation would be as fatal to England's prestige abroad as to your own liberty. Remember the old war-cry of our ancestors, 'For God and England!' Good-bye."

And as old Hoyle conducted me back along the silent, echoing hall, the feeling came over me that the warning of the Marquess was an ominous one—that my secret mission to Rome was far more dangerous than I had anticipated.

CHAPTER VII

I INTERVIEW THE HOME SECRETARY

I FOUND myself in a very embarrassing position, and almost immediately I got outside into Berkeley Square I regretted that I had not told the Marquess the whole story of my previous night's adventure and sought his advice.

On the one hand I was despatched on a

most important secret mission to Italy, while on the other I was bound to remain and give evidence in the case of the dead man, White. On my walk along Piccadilly I carefully reviewed the situation, and saw that if I left London and was absent at the coroner's inquiry, such absence must cause the police to entertain grave suspicions against me; while if I remained it would be in disobedience to the orders of my chief.

The police were unaware of my profession, and would no doubt raise a hue and cry if I were not present at the inquest, while on the other hand I could not conceal from myself the truth, that by my foolish promise to my mysterious love I was actually an accessory after the fact.

In the inquiry my evidence would be most important, yet to remain in London for a week or ten days until the verdict was given was impossible.

I turned into the American bar of the Criterion, that meeting-place of London's adventurers, book-makers, honest men and rogues, and over a manhattan made a bold decision, namely, to go direct to the Home Secretary himself, and explain the situation. I knew him slightly, and an interview would

effectively put an end to any inquiries Scotland Yard might make about myself.

Therefore, half an hour later, I ascended the stairs at the Home Office, in Whitehall, and was met by a pompous messenger who said :

“ Sir Henry Monkhouse sees no one without appointment. What’s your business ? ”

“ Of a private nature.”

“ Then you must write, and you’ll get a reply from the secretary,” he replied with a sneer.

Messengers in the Government offices are proverbial for discourtesy to callers.

“ I think not,” I said, and taking from my pocket an envelope, I scribbled a few words in pencil on my card, enclosed it in the envelope, and marking it “ private,” ordered him to deliver it personally to the minister in question.

With ill grace and a careful survey of my personal appearance, he invited me into a bare waiting-room, and then went to carry out my orders, at length returning in surprise that I should be at once welcomed to the great man’s room.

“ Sir Henry will see you, sir,” he announced in a very changed tone, now that he saw the

effect my card had had upon his chief, and he ushered me into the Home Secretary's private room.

The Right Honourable Sir Henry Monkhouse, Baronet, was a man of about sixty; tall, erect, and clean shaven, with those peculiarly aquiline features which seem hereditary to those who follow the legal profession. He was a distinguished barrister and Member of Parliament, and had on several occasions before served in Lord Salisbury's administrations in minor capacities, until he now held the very onerous if not very lucrative office of His Majesty's Secretary of State for the Home Department.

He smiled pleasantly as I entered, and I took a chair at his bidding; then, when the door had closed, he said :

"Curiously enough, Captain Jardine, I was just about to send across to the Foreign Office to ascertain if you were at home, for I know that the greater part of your time is spent across the Channel. It is most fortunate that you called, for I wish to consult you upon a very curious fact that has to-day been placed before me."

I sat in silent surprise at this, for I had entered with apologies on my lips for

intruding without an appointment, yet instead I found myself welcomed and my aid sought.

"The facts very briefly are these," exclaimed the Home Secretary, bending forward from his chair and turning over some papers lying upon the writing-table before him. "Some months ago the special department at Scotland Yard which deals with anarchists and other foreign undesirables, discovered that there had arrived in England a certain man who in Vienna, Pesth, and Belgrade was known to be a spy in the service of one of the Powers. Now I shall be glad if you will kindly follow me in this matter very carefully. The man in question remained a fortnight in London, had certain negotiations with a German living in a street off the Tottenham Court Road, and then went to Newcastle-on-Tyne, where he took lodgings in a poor quarter of that city. That he led a double life is quite clear, for while residing on the Tyneside as a labourer, he would now and then come to London well dressed, and stay at the Hotel Cecil or the Euston Hotel and lead the life of a gentleman." And he paused.

"A spy, I suppose!" was my remark. "Newcastle is suspiciously near the Armstrong factory."

The Home Secretary nodded, as though he approved of what I said. Then he continued :

“ It appears that an inspector of the Criminal Investigation Department named Munday was in Vienna following an absconding solicitor, and in the course of his inquiries alighted upon the man who subsequently came to England. He gave information to the special department, with the result that the fellow was carefully watched.”

“ With what result ? ”

“ Well, with the result that nothing whatever was discovered against him,” was the Home Secretary’s reply. “ It was well known in Pesth that the man was a spy, and the police there were actually on the point of arresting him when he escaped across the frontier to Belgrade, and thence came to England.”

“ In whose service is he ? ”

“ Ah ! that is not at all clear. He has had some secret negotiations with a German named Sachs, but the latter suddenly disappeared, and his whereabouts is not at present known. He seems to have evaded the police very cleverly and got back to the Continent. From the report here, it appears that the spy’s suspicions were somehow

aroused in Newcastle a few weeks ago, and he returned to London, where a strict watch was at first kept upon him. After some time, however, the suspicions seemed groundless, and this watch was to a great extent relinquished — with a somewhat remarkable result.”

And he looked me straight in the face with an air of mystery.

“ In what manner was the result remarkable ? ” I inquired, much interested in the story ; for although a spy myself, I entertained no favour towards the swarms of foreign agents who were constantly endeavouring to pry into our secrets.

“ Well,” he said slowly, “ the fact is that the individual in question was found dead last night in the roadway on Sydenham Hill — murdered, it is believed, although at present that is not quite clear.”

“ On Sydenham Hill ! ” I cried, jumping from my chair. “ Then the man went under the name of White—Henry White—and was living at the Hotel Victoria ? ”

“ Exactly ! ” exclaimed the Home Secretary, in his turn surprised ; “ but how did you know ? ”

“ I knew that the man White at the ‘ Vic-

toria' was a man of colour—a Persian, or something—while the White found dead at Sydenham was apparently an Englishman," I said. "There is a great and profound mystery about the affair, Sir Henry."

"No doubt there is. That is why I wished to know your opinion, and to see if you could identify him. You know quite a number of foreign secret agents, I believe."

"Yes, but I cannot identify the dead man," I said, utterly dumbfounded by the manner in which this strange affair seemed to cling about me.

"You haven't yet had an opportunity," he remarked.

I hesitated for a moment, then made a sudden resolve.

"I unfortunately have," I replied; "the man was found by me dead on Sydenham Hill last night, and it was owing to that very fact that I have called upon you."

"You—you found him! This is most extraordinary, Captain Jardine, that you of all men should make the discovery. Were you keeping him under observation?"

"Not at all. It was quite a chance discovery, and I had no idea that he was suspected of being a spy until this moment."

The revelation was certainly a startling one. What, I wondered, could be the connection between my love and the man suspected of being a foreign spy ?

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell the whole story of how I had met the mysterious Clare Stanway, of the quarrel in the grounds of the Crystal Palace, and its subsequent result ; yet my natural caution on the instant asserted itself, and I saw that by confessing I should admit myself to have been the victim of a woman.

A man never likes to confess that a woman has got the better of him, even though compelled always to admit that what is known as the inferior sex is much superior in wiles, in wit, and in wisdom.

So I conveniently disregarded all events previous to the moment when I found the suspected man lying dead behind the pillar-post. Indeed, I made a fictitious excuse for passing along that thoroughfare, and explained my presence at Sydenham so well, that I flattered myself at having entirely deceived one of the sharpest and most acute men in the United Kingdom.

I told the plain, unvarnished tale of how the constable appeared on the scene at

almost the very moment of my discovery, of my search in the dead man's room in the Hotel Victoria, and of the reason why I had given the police a fictitious name.

Scotland Yard had not lost a moment in reporting the whole facts to the Home Office. The statement by the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police which Sir Henry handed to me gave the story exactly as I had related it, and it also mentioned me as the discoverer of the crime, with the addition that nothing was known about me, but that inquiries were being actively instituted.

I laughed when I read this passage, and repeated it aloud, saying :

" I hope, Sir Henry, you will let the Commissioner know in confidence who and what I am, in order that no publicity be given to myself. To explain my profession and my connection with the Foreign Office would be to ruin all chances of my future success as a secret agent abroad, and in all probability imperil my personal safety."

" Oh, I quite understand that, Captain Jardine. You may rely upon it that I shall at once take the necessary steps to suppress your connection with the affair. Indeed, I hope you will be able to assist Scotland Yard

in successfully clearing up the mystery. You know more of the ways of the foreign secret agents than any one else."

I laughed within myself when I reflected upon all I really did know.

"I much regret that I have to leave to-night for Rome upon an important mission entrusted to me by the Marquess of Glinton. I cannot, therefore, possibly be present at the inquest, and it was to obtain your order excusing me from attendance that I called."

The Home Secretary looked grave. His brows contracted slightly, and he fixed his searching eyes upon me as though a faint suspicion had flashed through his mind.

"That is most unfortunate. Is your immediate departure for Italy imperative?"

"Most imperative. I am compelled to leave London to-night."

"And can you throw no further light upon the tragedy?" he inquired, his eyes still fixed upon mine.

"No," I answered; "I cannot."

What other response could I make, now that I had sworn to Clare to lie for her sake?

CHAPTER VIII

IN ROME

It was past midnight in the Eternal City.

I had spent fifty weary hours in a stuffy wagon-lit on that long railroad that runs between Calais and Rome, to me as familiar as Pall Mall, and on arrival had gone at once to the Hotel de Russie, made a hasty toilet, and then had driven immediately to the British Embassy.

You, my reader, if you have visited the Italian capital, know it well—that great white mansion with the beautiful gardens close to the Porta Pia. Your cabman has probably pointed it out to you as you have driven up the wide Via Venti Settembre, knowing that you, being English, will regard it as one of the “sights.” Perhaps, too, it may have been a festa, and if so, your eyes have been gladdened by the sight of your own national flag.

It must have been nearly one o’clock when Dawson, the footman, informed me that His Excellency was out, but that her ladyship was at home and would probably see me.

I knew well the habits of the ambassador and his wife. Whenever the former was absent at night at official functions, she always sat up until his return; therefore I sent in my name, explaining that I had just arrived from London and wished to see His Excellency on a most important matter.

Without ceremony I was quickly ushered into the small, elegant drawing-room where her ladyship sat, a pleasant woman of fifty-five, whose face still bore traces of great beauty, and whose manner was essentially that of a cosmopolitan. She was a clever woman, *au fait* with all the wiles of diplomacy, and it was rumoured that several of her husband's most brilliant successes in Constantinople had been, in a great measure, due to her keen foresight and feminine intuition. They were a devoted pair. She kept herself in touch with the international relations from day to day, and from her Lord Clancare withheld few official secrets. To her, too, I had been in many ways indebted during the past ten years, therefore the warmth of our greeting was mutual.

"Well, Captain Jardine, you really are an unexpected visitor," she said, reseating herself and laying her book aside. "We heard

of you a few weeks ago in Cracow. Where have you sprung from now ? ”

“ From home,” I said, smiling. “ I only arrived an hour ago. The luxe was full, so I suppose the season here must be a good one this year.”

“ Very good indeed. Dawson said you want to see my husband. He’s at the Quirinal—an official dinner—but I expect him back at any moment. So while you wait you must tell me all the news from home.”

“ There is very little except what you see in the papers,” I answered. “ London is still dull and dirty.”

“ And yet how dear the old place is to us who are compelled to live in exile year after year,” she said. “ You know yourself, Captain Jardine, how you pined for town during those three years you were attaché with us at the Porte.”

“ True,” I admitted, recollecting those idle years on the Bosphorus, when, in my youth, her ladyship had been almost as a mother to me. “ But now that I’m a free-lance I envy those who have a comfortable appointment. One is never satisfied in this world.”

“ And are you free-lancing in Rome just now ? ” she inquired.

I nodded in the affirmative.

"Please remember that my name is Francis Vesey, as it was before when I stayed at the 'Russie.'"

"And you will look up all your old friends again, I suppose? You'll find them all ready to welcome you."

"Yes," I said; "but might I ask a favour of you, namely, that when visiting to-morrow you will announce that Vesey has returned to Rome. The news will spread, and I may require to accept invitations."

"I have a reception to-morrow night. You will come. It is the easiest way. Last time you were here was a merry one for you, I believe."

"Thanks to your ladyship," I answered. "Without your introductions and good offices I should have remained an utter outsider."

"My dear Captain Jardine, it is my duty as an ambassador's wife to help you in your confidential missions. You know I'm at all times ready to give you assistance."

She made no inquiry as to the reason I had come to Rome, knowing well that my instructions were secret, as they always were. Her husband would know, and perhaps he would

tell her—most probably he would. Clancare always said that his wife was the only woman he had ever met who could keep a secret, and he was certainly right.

She was that night plainly dressed in black, for she had dined alone, and had been writing letters afterwards. Her elder daughter Enid was, she told me, staying in Florence with an aunt who had taken a villa at Fiesole for the season; while Dorothy, the younger, had gone to finish her French education with a family at Versailles. The Embassy seemed quite dull without the pair of merry, light-hearted girls. Enid was a particularly pretty girl of purely English type, blue eyes, fair hair and fresh complexion, and in Rome she had, I knew, a host of admirers among that over-dressed crowd of young Italian counts and marquises on the look-out for an advantageous match.

Once or twice her flirtations had caused the Ambassador and his wife grave misgivings, and on such occasions she had been promptly packed off to England, or to Germany, or elsewhere, in order to allow the love-flame to die down. Yet, after all, this was not surprising. A pretty girl just out of her teens, and moving in the best and most

exclusive set in a gay winter city like Rome, was certain to be courted by those young elegants of perfect manners and empty pockets. Clancare and his wife were well aware of this, but were ever anxious lest some day one of these harmless flirtations should develop into a really serious affair.

An ambassador has often to open his house to undesirables from a matrimonial point of view, therefore the possession of a pretty daughter is always a matter of grave concern.

Her ladyship had been gossiping about the Court, the people at the moment in Rome, the brilliant ball at the Corsini Palace on the previous night, the reception by the new Russian Ambassador, when the door suddenly opened and her husband entered. Tall, erect, with grey hair and pointed beard, he presented a striking figure in his full diplomatic uniform, with the Star of the Order of the Bath glittering upon his coat, and the broad ribbon across his shirt-front.

"Why, Jardine," he exclaimed, shaking hands, "whatever brings you here?"

"The chief's orders," I answered, smiling. "I've come through from London, and her ladyship has been kindly entertaining me until you returned."

He opened a telegram which his wife handed him, read it quickly, then invited me into his private den, a small cosy room that was familiar to me. Having closed the door, he drew me a chair up to the wood fire, and having taken one himself inquired the reason of my visit.

In a few brief sentences I explained what the Marquess had told me, whereupon his brows darkened, and I saw that beneath the airy manner which he assumed towards the world, was a mind filled with gravest apprehensions.

“Yes, Jardine; it is only too true that our enemies are actively at work,” he said in a low, earnest voice. “That foolish speech in praise of the Pope was the cause of it all, and now there is a deep and clever conspiracy on foot against our power in the Mediterranean. To-night, across the royal table, I have been chatting with the Count de Suresnes, the French Ambassador, and endeavouring to ascertain the real state of affairs, but all in vain. These three weeks past I’ve spared no pains to try and make out the intentions of France towards Italy, but so well is the secret guarded by Vizardelli, the Foreign Minister, that even the King

himself, my personal friend, appears to be in ignorance. He admitted to me only yesterday that he feared that public opinion had been aroused against us, and that the French were making it an excuse to approach his Government with a view to an alliance."

"An alliance with France could not be a lasting one," I ventured to observe.

"Of course not," His Excellency admitted; "but the very fact would injure our prestige—and, besides, war might occur during the period the unstable alliance lasted. You know quite well how insecure is the European situation to-day."

"And the King himself? Is he in favour of the proposed alliance?"

"Not at all. His words to me only yesterday were: 'I hate both France and the French, but it is public opinion, and my Ministers, who rule the country—not myself.'"

"Then it is more than possible that His Majesty himself would assist us, if he knew that our inquiries were directed towards checkmating the French?"

The Ambassador smiled. The idea of a sovereign assisting a secret agent rather tickled him. But I had been presented to

the young King, when Prince of Naples, and had met him on several occasions afterwards. He knew that I was connected with the British Embassy, and he had often chatted with me quite affably.

"His Majesty is, like his lamented father, Umberto, a staunch friend of England," I said, "and I cannot help thinking that he would assist us if he could."

"But how can he?" queried Lord Clancare. "If he ascertained the true state of affairs from his Foreign Minister, and revealed the secret to us, he would be guilty of treason. No, my dear Jardine, King Victor Emmanuel is our good friend, but, like the great Czar, his hands are tied. In these days the Press rules a country to a greater extent than does its sovereign. Why, our own Boer war would never have occurred had it not been forced on by the howling, and therefore popular section of the 'Jingo Press!'"

Like every other British diplomat, His Excellency had a deep-rooted horror of Press comments, and he often "worked" the chief London newspapers to publish statements which, being opposed to the truth, strengthened his own hands in diplomatic negotiations. More than one Press telegram he had written

with his own pen and handed it to the correspondent who, like himself, knew that the statement had no foundation in fact. Embassy news is never reliable, and in the interests of our diplomacy it seldom ought to be.

"So Lord Glinton has sent you here to discover what you can—eh?" he went on in a rather dubious voice. "Well, Jardine, I'm afraid you haven't very much chance of success. I only wish you could discover something. Suresnes and his staff are absolutely sphinx-like, while Vizardelli studiously avoids me."

"A fact in itself suspicious."

"Certainly. But you see we are utterly in the dark at present. What we want to know is the exact terms of the French offer."

"That is just the point which the Chief made to me three days ago. He is prepared to outbid our enemies. France has everything to gain by the alliance——"

"And Italy has everything to lose," the Ambassador interrupted. "The King knows that quite well, but with such a scoundrelly Ministry, who are all open to bribery from the door-keeper up to the Minister himself, how can he act? Crispi was an adequate

specimen of the Italian Minister, and the recent Bank of Naples inquiry showed how some of the rulers of poor, down-trodden Italy have feathered their own nests. If we had such a Ministry in England there would be a revolution to-morrow. And yet they wonder at strikes and anarchy in Italy! Some day, however, the young King will adopt the policy of the clean slate, and the sooner he does the better for his nation."

"Is there any one you suspect, who knows of the exact terms of this supposed Franco-Italian agreement?" I inquired, after I had delivered to him the message given me by Lord Glinton.

"Only two persons—the French Ambassador and the Minister Vizardelli himself," was the reply.

"Well," I said, "it is better that I should set to work alone, without any official connection with the Embassy. I am at the 'Russie' under the name of Vesey, as before; therefore I shall visit here, look up my old friends, and at the same time keep eyes and ears open."

"I can only hope that you'll be successful in discovering the truth," responded the Ambassador with a sigh; "but at the outset

you should be warned against one person here," he added.

"Against whom?"

"Against a certain woman—a woman who knows you."

CHAPTER IX

THE LITTLE COUNTESS

AT Lady Clancare's reception on the following night all diplomatic Rome was present.

The functions at the British Embassy are noteworthy amongst the many brilliant gatherings in the Eternal City during the winter, for it is nothing unusual for the King and Queen to be present; hence the great rooms are always filled with a distinguished throng. Roman society is extremely exclusive, therefore the English who dwell in the big hotels and obtain chance invitations to one house or another, know nothing of it. An outsider is seldom admitted within that charmed circle which revolves about the embassies.

That night, as I bent over her ladyship's hand, I saw about me the glare and glitter that I knew so well—the halo of a foreign Court. The gay dresses of the women—toilettes, of course, from the Rue de la Paix,

for no smart woman would think of wearing an Italian-built gown—the picturesque uniforms of the men, from the white tunic of the Czar's representative to the plain, black, claw-hammer coat of the United States Minister, and the thousand and one different stars of chivalry and ribbons of the various orders, all combined to make up an effective and dazzling scene.

Three years ago I had strolled through those wax-lit rooms amid the swish of silken flounces and the odour of perfume. Ah! how much of life had I crammed into those thirty-six brief months. I had been in love then—in love with a woman whom I had believed to be the very incarnation of the Madonna, a woman with the face of Raphael's celebrated picture in the Pitti. But as amid that gay, chattering crowd the recollection of it all came back to me, I crushed down the bitter remembrance. It was of the past.

I was older, with heart and thought steeled against a woman's wiles. Yes, the recollection of those gay days of three years ago had left in my mouth an unpleasant taste which nothing could remove.

"Hulloa, Vesey! You here again!" ex-

claimed a man in uniform, speaking English with an accent. The greeting aroused me, and I recognized in the speaker, Felix Hoffmann, the Austrian military attaché, who had been one of my most intimate friends.

We began to talk, strolling together about the rooms. The old crowd was there. I was recognized by dozens of men and women, and in an hour had received quite a number of invitations.

Once, as I passed two Italians, well-known members of that official bear-garden, the Chamber of Deputies, I overheard the remark :

“ Why, there’s that Englishman, Vesey, back again ! I wonder if the little Countess is here also ? ”

I bit my lip, and turned to greet the old Princess Peruzzi, whose yellow face was positively ugly, but who was, nevertheless, accounted one of the principal hostesses in Rome.

The old lady, who had been very kind to me in past days, wanted to know the reason of my return. She was one of the few people who knew of my love and of how it had ended, and she openly expressed surprise that I should have re-visited the scene of my past

unhappiness. So carefully had I concealed my true name and the true nature of my calling that none knew of it outside the Embassy. To them all I was Francis Vesey, an Englishman of means, and an intimate friend of Lord and Lady Clancare.

I had often smiled within myself when I imagined what would be the feelings of that cosmopolitan set, if they became aware that I was one of that well-hated genus—the secret agent.

Presently I met Lord Clancare, who had taken leave of the pretty daughter of the Duke of Catania, and was standing aside, thoughtfully regarding the crowd.

“It isn’t fair that your Excellency should refuse to tell me the lady’s name,” I said, referring to our conversation on the previous night.

“Ah, no!” he answered, with a forced laugh. “I have warned you. That’s enough. Recollect the little Countess.”

“No,” I said, “that is all bygone. The memory of it is painful to me. I was a fool—an absolute fool!”

“Yes, you were a fool,” he laughed. “But many a better man than you has been ‘had’ by a woman. Heart tragedies happen

to all of us sooner or later, in this atmosphere which the world calls diplomatic, and which is, in reality, that of lies and love. Half the crowd here are liars ; the other half, lovers."

I laughed at his *sotto voce* remark. He was witty when he chose, and was father of many a *bon mot* in diplomacy.

" I agree," I said ; then, in all seriousness, added, " I can't, however, understand why you warn me against a woman without telling me her name."

" I can't tell you what I don't know," His Excellency responded mysteriously.

" You are actually in ignorance of it ? "

" I am—at least of her real name."

" Where does she live ? At least you can tell me that."

" As I told you last night, I cannot. All I know is that she has made active inquiries in certain quarters after you and evidently knows you as Jardine."

" That's awkward," I remarked. " Is she young ? "

" Yes—and pretty."

" She's not here to-night, I suppose ? "

" Haven't seen her," he said, smiling. " But," he added, " don't worry your head over her. Beware of all the pretty faces and

sweet smiles around you and you'll be safe. You've got a difficult inquiry before you, so take the advice of an old diplomatic hand and avoid *la femme*."

The thought of my mysterious love, in London, and that unfortunate promise I had made to her, flashed through my memory. I had it upon my conscience that I knew her to be a murderess, by her own confession.

Our conversation was interrupted by the Count de Suresnes, the French Ambassador, who strolled up, and shook hands with His Excellency, who introduced me to him. This man who held the secret which I was so anxious to obtain, was of middle age, a brown-eyed, brown-bearded Parisian, with a somewhat sallow face, an elegant manner, and a breast much decorated. Beside the representative of the French Republic, or that of the Kingdom of Portugal, the decorations of Lord Clancare were entirely outshone. His plain Star of the Bath made no show as did the rows of ribbons and crosses worn by the representatives of other nations. His Majesty does not give permission to his ambassadors or consuls to accept foreign orders; hence the only decorations they wear are English ones—a fact that some-

times causes a good deal of dissatisfaction and heart-burning in our embassies.

The representative of our jealous neighbours across the Channel chatted to us affably enough, although, of course, politics were eschewed. He struck me as quite a charming man as far as outward appearances went. His previous appointment had been at Madrid, whence he had been transferred to Rome about a year ago.

As I stood chatting with him, I racked my brains to devise some plan by which I could obtain this man's confidence and gain knowledge of the secret negotiations in progress.

Although the world was happily in ignorance, there had occurred, at that moment, a crisis in the history of England. A plot had long been hatched to oust British power from the Mediterranean, and it was now on the point of being brought to a successful issue. Somewhere, either in the hands of Monsieur Delcassé at the Quai D'Orsay, or in the chancellerie of the French Embassy, there existed a draft treaty. On any day, nay, at any moment, this might be signed, and if so then our control of the road to the East must be lost, our power in the Mediterranean replaced,

our possession of Gibraltar and Malta nullified, and our long-boasted naval strength, upon which we are to rely in case of a European war or invasion, outbalanced by other nations.

This thought was not a pleasant one. Had the truth leaked out to the Press, England would have been aflame and France triumphant.

Yes, the Marquess of Glinton's fears were not unfounded. It was a very dark outlook for England, the blackest since those hot, fevered days during the Russo-Turkish war, when any false diplomatic move might have brought us grip to grip with Russia.

Yet what task more difficult could have been entrusted to me than that which His Majesty's Minister had given into my hands? True, I had been on one or two occasions successful in getting at the truth; nevertheless, in the present instance, I could discern no means by which the clever diplomacy of France could be checkmated. Lord Clancare was himself aware of the almost insurmountable obstacles to the success of my secret mission and had, on the previous night, openly expressed his doubts.

Nevertheless, the secret agent has frequently a greater chance of ascertaining the

truth than the ambassador, hedged in as he is by etiquette and a gorgeous staff. The spy may live under any guise, so long as he does not attract the attention of the police, and lay his plans from any point of vantage that may offer.

For myself, I was quite well aware that if the Marquis Vizardelli, the Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs, became aware of my mission and my presence in Rome, I should at once receive a very unpleasant visit from the police. As in Petersburg, so in Rome; they deal with spies in a very summary manner.

The fact that the unnamed woman, mentioned by His Excellency, knowing my real name might betray me, caused me some rather disturbing reflections.

Who was she? I wondered.

When the Count de Suresnes had left us, I returned again to the subject.

"Really, your Excellency," I said, "I cannot help thinking that by withholding that woman's name from me you may imperil my safety."

"Your safety?" he asked. "How?"

"If she knows my name, she may know of my mission," I answered in an undertone.

"Yes," he said thoughtfully, "she may; but the fact is I can tell you nothing more than what I've already explained."

"Then you have not met her?"

"No; I only know her through a third person, who must be nameless. I only regret that by reason of a promise I made I can tell you nothing further."

"But under what name is this mysterious person known here?"

He was silent for a moment, then answered:

"You may regard it as strange, but I do not know."

With quick perception, he saw the dubious look upon my countenance and hastened to add:

"My wife, I believe, knows more than I do. But do not mention the matter to her. She would be annoyed if she thought I had aroused any fear within you."

"Then you really anticipate danger of exposure?"

"If the woman is your enemy," he said; "but she may, after all, be your friend."

"Let's hope so," I remarked, with a smile. "Yet it certainly is anything but reassuring to know that the woman may be here to-night, watching me, and ready to denounce me to the police."

"If she is your friend, she will no doubt approach you as soon as she knows you are back in Rome."

"She may approach me if she is my enemy. How long ago was she making these inquiries?"

"A few weeks."

"And did she tell people of my real name?"

"Only one person—who mentioned it to the person I have referred to, but cannot name."

"She knows nothing of my connection with the secret service?"

"Ah," responded His Excellency dubiously, "that's more than I can tell you. My own opinion, however, is that she probably does know."

At that instant the big white doors at the end of the great gilded salon were flung open by the embassy footmen, and a loud voice announced, in French:

"His Majesty the King!"

Lord Clancare, leaving me, hurried across to greet the smiling, pleasant-faced young man, with the small, dark moustache and keen, searching eyes, before whom the ladies were bowing and the men saluting, as he walked up the room.

CHAPTER X

IN WHICH CLARE STANWAY SPEAKS

LIKE our own Row, at home, the Allée des Acacias in Paris, the Promenade des Anglais at Nice, the Bois de la Cambre in Brussels, or the Cascine in Florence, the Corso in Rome is always gay at what the Italians call "the hour of the passeggiata," namely, four o'clock. It is then that all Rome turns out to drive or walk up that long, narrow street from the Piazza Colonna to the Pincio Hill. At that hour every one who is any one is out in the winter sunshine, and the straight, rather mean thoroughfare, which always disappoints the tourist, is filled with vehicles of every description, from the smart victorias or landaus of the exclusive set, to the humble cabs of our tweed-coated or tweed-gowned compatriots who are "doing" the Eternal City for twelve guineas, inclusive. Every one meets every one else in the Corso. Ronzi's and the "bun shop" (as the English tea-shop is called) are filled with the feminine world, while the men stroll up and down in

pairs, hat-lifting, laughing, ogling. The *al fresco* reunion is like none other in the world, for the Corso is Rome, and Rome the Corso.

From Sydenham Hill to the Corso is a far cry, yet through the four days that had passed since I had alighted from the sleeping car that had brought me to the Italian capital, my mind had ever been filled with the vivid recollections of that night, of my tragic discovery, and of my rash promise.

I had started upon a mission which I felt to be foredoomed to failure, and with my thoughts ever concentrated upon the mystery of the dead man, White, it was impossible calmly to survey the situation or decide upon any plan. Truth to tell, I had idled about for four days, and was idling now, as I stopped at the kiosque opposite Bocconi's and purchased a London paper, as had been my daily habit three years before.

Then I continued my walk, mingling with the crowd on their way to the Porta del Popolo. All Rome was talking of the brilliant ball at the Ruspoli Palace, on the previous night, a function which I had attended, having received a card from Princess Ruspoli, through Lady Clancare's kind offices. Society chatted of the magnificent affair

from personal knowledge, while those without the pale discussed the description they had read in their *Tribuna* or *Messaggero*, and tried to fancy they had been there. It is ever thus, after a big function beside the Tiber. The Italians are the greatest chatterers of any race in Europe, and must always have some subject of gossip, scandalous or otherwise.

At the corner of the Via Condotti, I suddenly came face to face with a man I knew, Lorenzo Castellani, captain of artillery, a smart-looking fellow in his dark blue uniform and yellow facings.

He gave me a merry *buon giorno*, and a hearty handgrip, for we had been friends of old days, and I had always found him a particularly amusing companion. One of the most popular officers of the garrison, he was full of quaint stories, and one of the most constant habitués of the Aragno, as the Roman loves to call the Café Nazionale.

Receiving permission, he turned and walked with me, with clinking spurs and sword trailing upon the pavement.

"Well, Meester Vesee," he said, in his broken English, "I expected you had forgotten me. I wrote to your club in London after you left, but received no reply."

"I've been travelling," I answered vaguely "and when one is moving about, one neglects correspondence. Pray forgive me, for I fear I have treated all my friends in Rome alike."

"You've been travelling!" he said, dropping into Italian, for his English vocabulary was very limited. "Ah, how I wish I could get away from Rome!" he sighed, "but it is impossible."

"Your time will come some day," I laughed.

"And the little Countess?" he asked. "What of her?"

"I know nothing," I responded briefly, with some annoyance that he should broach the subject. "I have not seen her since the day I left Rome."

He looked at me quickly. Then, understanding the situation, merely ejaculated:

"Oh!"

That he was surprised was plain, but discerning by my reply that I did not wish to discuss her, deftly turned our conversation into another channel.

The little Countess! Would I never get rid of that hated association? Was my name so closely linked with hers that even after three years had gone; the gay and giddy circle that formed the society of Rome still

recollected the incident. Ah! I had been a fool then—a confounded fool.

And yet it had all served a purpose, distinct if dishonest.

Where, I wondered, was the Contessina—the little Countess—now? And all Rome wondered just as I did.

Castellani chatted on as we walked past the dark old palace of the Russian Embassy, for he was glad to meet me. He retailed all the tit-bits of gossip about our mutual friends. Contrary to the general run of Italian officers, he was of good family, a younger son of the Marquis Castellani, of Milan, and therefore received cards of invitation which were never sent to other men in his regiment.

He knew Rome and all there was worth knowing about it, being a veritable social encyclopædia as to who was who in that whirl of winter gaiety.

We were strolling across the broad Piazza del Popolo, towards that winding way which ascends to the fashionable drive of the Pincio, when of a sudden a handsome victoria, with rubber tyres and jingling bells dashed past us, and its occupant, a slim, dark-haired young woman with well-cut features and a pair of wonderful black eyes, recognizing my com-

panion, raised her gloved hand to him and ordered her coachman to pull up.

Castellani was at her side in a moment, hat in hand, and as I approached leisurely I noticed that they exchanged rapid words and that she glanced quickly towards me.

He introduced her as Mademoiselle Beranger, and she greeted me in French. Dainty and *chic* she certainly was, with the vivacious manner of the true Parisienne. Though dressed neatly in black, relieved by a touch of turquoise at the throat, I did not fail to notice that her hat was of the latest mode and that her heavy sables were of rarest quality.

"Monsieur is a stranger to Rome like myself?" she inquired, her dancing eyes turned upon me.

"I'm scarcely a stranger, mademoiselle. Three years ago I drank the water at the Trevi and threw a sou into the basin to ensure my return—and here I am!"

"Ah!" she laughed; "you are superstitious. I did not think you had any superstitions—you English. This is my first season here, and I am charmed with it. All is so different after Paris—so very different."

Her fine pair of eyes were restless and eager

to move; therefore she turned to Castellani and said, with a meaning look:

"You will not forget your engagement with me this evening—will you?"

"Certainly not, mademoiselle. How could I?"

"Then *au revoir* to both of you!" she exclaimed, with a wave of her little hand, and her carriage moved on swiftly towards the beautiful ornamental gardens on the hillside overlooking the unchanging city.

"Who's that?" I asked my friend eagerly, as soon as she was out of hearing.

"Clementine Beranger: she's only been here a month or two and she's all the rage—the smartest girl in Rome."

"She's very handsome," I remarked.

"Who is she?"

"Daughter of old Beranger, the millionaire sugar-refiner who died a couple of years ago. She inherited everything and now lives with an aunt at the Villa Fiore, a splendid place on the other side of the Monte Gianicolo, which she rents from Prince Borghese."

"The Villa Fiore!" I exclaimed. "Why that's one of the finest here. The Emperor of Austria was staying there when I was last in Rome."

“Certainly, but when a woman has three millions sterling, she can afford to indulge in luxuries.”

“You appear to be pretty friendly with her, my dear Lorenzo,” I said chaffingly. “The latest flame, I suppose?”

“She is very charming,” he responded in all seriousness. “Sometimes her aunt invites me to dine, as I am invited to-night.”

“And a little *tête-à-tête* afterwards, eh, lucky fellow!”

“Perhaps so,” he laughed. “I expect, however, there will be other guests. Clementine is surrounded by a hundred men, all ready to fall in love with her. It is so seldom that beauty is attached to wealth, as in her case.”

I could quite believe what he said. A pretty girl, with three millions, was not likely to want for friends—especially in a city of fortune-hunters, like Rome. Italians are noteworthy for making marriages of convenience. It was on the tip of my tongue to say so, but I suddenly recollected that Lorenzo was himself Italian.

“She had no difficulty in getting into the good set, I suppose?”

“None whatever. The Countess Suresnes,

wife of the French Ambassador, took her up, and introduced her. Now she is to be seen almost everywhere, even at the Quirinal."

"Well," I said, "I congratulate you on your friendship, my dear fellow. She's certainly the prettiest girl I've seen in Rome up to the present. Rumour gives her a lover, I suppose, as it always does a good-looking woman?"

"No," he answered in that decisive tone which made it plain to me that such a suggestion annoyed him. "There is not any suspicion of such a thing."

"But you're in love with her, just a little, yourself," I laughed.

"Perhaps," he admitted, smiling in a self-satisfied way. He was a sad lady-killer, this smart young officer.

Together we walked up the hill where, in the winter sunset, the gay world was taking its airing. Across the old stone terrace, Rome lay spread at our feet, calm and mysterious in the crimson afterglow. As we halted to gaze across the wonderful panorama there came up to us the clanging of a hundred bells ringing the Ave Maria, while away, far in the purple haze, rose the massive tower of Sant' Angelo, with its bronze figure, the winding Tiber and the great dome of St. Peter's.

Near the water-clock we passed the pretty Clementine, driving swiftly on her return. Recognizing us, she smiled, waved her hand and disappeared. But in that brief instant our eyes had met and in them I had noticed a strange look, half of surprise, half of amusement—a look which I could not analyze, and yet which caused me some reflection.

We descended the hill again, and in the Piazza, outside the Church of the Miracoli, I parted from Lorenzo, who took a cab to the barracks, while I walked up the Via Babuino to my hotel.

A letter lay upon my dressing-table. It bore an English stamp, with the London postmark, and was addressed to me in a firm and educated feminine hand. In all eagerness, I tore it open and glanced at the signature—"Clare Stanway."

I held my breath. How was it possible that she had become aware of my assumed name, or of my whereabouts?

The letter bore neither address nor date, but my eager eyes read as follows:—

"DEAR CAPTAIN JARDINE,—

"You will no doubt think it strange that you should receive a letter from me

addressed to the name by which you choose to be known in Rome. It matters not by what means I have discovered the reason which takes you so suddenly to Italy, for this letter is to thank you most sincerely for the great service you rendered me on the last occasion we met, and for your vow of secrecy. I, on my part, make a vow of secrecy to you—a vow that will be rigorously kept as long as you keep yours. Further, I would, as your devoted friend, warn you to be careful of your safety, for you have, in Rome, certain enemies who are plotting against you. In one quarter at least the object of your secret mission is known; therefore, beware! As regards the unfortunate incident so familiar to both of us, I suppose you have read the report of the inquiry in the newspapers? If suspicion falls on you, recollect your vow—and mine. In Rome your task is no easy one. The secret you wish to learn is too well guarded. Recollect, however, that you have in me always a firm and devoted friend, one who indeed owes her life to you.

“CLARE STANWAY.”

CHAPTER XI

SOME SERIOUS CONSIDERATIONS

I TURNED the letter over in my hand. It was itself an enigma.

I had never betrayed to Clare my real calling. On the contrary, I had led her to believe that I possessed an income just sufficiently large to enable me to travel and enjoy life. Never once had I referred to my connection with the Foreign Office, and yet it seemed quite plain that she was fully acquainted, not only with my plans, but also with the identity of my unsuspected enemies.

Strange, too, that she concealed her whereabouts so that I could hold no communication with her. Possibly, of course, she did this in order to prevent me betraying her.

I took from my pocket the *Standard* I had bought at the kiosk earlier in the afternoon, and, searching through it, soon found a column headed "The Mysterious Discovery on Sydenham Hill." The inquest was fully reported there, and from it I saw how carefully my own

connection with the affair had, by the Home Secretary's orders, been obliterated. The constable who deposed to finding the body of the man White behind the pillar-post made no mention of my presence, neither did the inspector, the hotel clerk, nor any other of the witnesses. Evidently all had been instructed by the police beforehand. Indeed, the fact had come out in evidence that while the man found at Sydenham was apparently an Englishman, the man who had occupied a room at the "Victoria" was undoubtedly coloured. To me all showed the hand of the Home Office carefully at work to conceal the true facts from the jury and the public, for upon the evidence of the police surgeon, that the man had died from an aneurism, the twelve Sydenham tradesmen had returned a verdict of "Death from natural causes."

Sir Henry Monkhouse had kept faith with me. Scotland Yard, as I afterwards learnt, knew quite well that it was a case of murder by means of some swift and potent poison. In all probability inquiries were actually on foot, but, as far as the public went, they remained in ignorance of the true facts. A newspaper sensation is always avoided by the Home Office whenever possible, and the

police frequently suppress facts in order to obtain a more free hand in their inquiries. Many a time have the ends of justice been defeated by a too-zealous journalist.

It was curious, very curious, that the woman under the spell of whose beauty I had been should warn me almost in the same words as Lord Clancare had used. What could she possibly know? Although English, she had, I believed, acquired that slight foreign accent by long residence abroad, but certainly not in Italy. Once, indeed, she had struck me as Belgian by her peculiar pronunciation of French. One can always detect an Italian in speaking French, by the constant desire to end a word with a vowel—a mistake she, however, never committed.

That night I dined at the table d'hôte, not because it was amusing, but because I wished to see whether I recognized any one among my fellow-guests. The "Russie" is a popular hotel among both English and Russians. English pilgrimages to St. Peter's put up there; the women in black with lace shawls over their heads, and the men who wear evening dress in the daytime, for such costume is *de rigueur* for those who go to receive the Papal blessing. Modern Rome is indeed

a city of vivid contrasts, of reckless gaiety, of rigid self-denial, of the pleasures of worldliness and the deep fervour of the Roman Catholic religion. But Rome is Rome, Victor Emmanuel is King, and His Holiness is still a prisoner in the Vatican.

The *salle-à-manger* was, as usual, hot and crowded; the chatter, a veritable Babel, from the drawl of the American tourist "doing" Italy in ten days to the low guttural of the rich Pole and his fat wife, who have left their frost-bound estate in search of sunshine. But you all know the humours of the foreign table d'hôte. One side of me sat the ascetic-looking wife of an English country rector, while on the other was the consumptive daughter of a London tradesman. Therefore I was glad at last to escape the ordeal of conversation on trivialities, and presently strolled away down the Corso, bright under its big electric lights, to spend the remainder of the evening at the Café Nazionale.

As I expected, I met there several Italians I knew, one of them a Deputy from Bologna and member of the Extreme Left.

Over our coffee and those long Tuscan cigars so beloved in the South, I endeavoured

to learn something further regarding the rich daughter of the sugar refiner.

"Oh!" exclaimed one of the men, when I mentioned her, "young Castellani of the Artillery is hopelessly in love with her—dines at the Villa Fiore every night, they say."

"He was a fool always, where women are concerned," growled Salvi, the Deputy.

"Most of us bear that reputation," I laughed, as I lit a cigarette.

"You did, my dear friend, when you were last here," he bluntly remarked, smiling.

"How's the little Countess, by the way?"

"I don't know," I snapped; "she may be dead or even married, for all I care."

"Oh! it ended like that, did it!" he exclaimed in surprise. "And we all thought it was such a very serious affair."

"Serious for me," I blurted forth, "not for her. The man who makes himself a fool over a woman is bound to suffer. The lady always alights on the soft spot."

"Well," exclaimed the first man who had spoken, "our friend Lorenzo is making an idiot of himself over the pretty Parigina. He'll come a cropper if he's not careful. You know our old Roman proverb: '*La Donna ne sa un punto piu del Diavolo.*'"

"And a very true one," I declared, for my own experience of the fair sex had been long and varied, the tragic ending of my friendship with the fair Clare being the crowning point of a soured life.

My three companions chattered on, and I learnt from their gossip that the young Artillery captain was believed to be the lover of the pretty Clementine Beranger, and that the close friendship between the pair had been approved of, and even encouraged, by Madame Dumont, her aunt.

"I've heard one or two rather queer stories regarding Mademoiselle," exclaimed the Deputy Salvi. "How true they are, I don't know."

"What are they?" inquired one of the others, a gossip of the most confirmed type.

"Oh, they chiefly concern a certain gentle man who arrived in Rome in her train, but suddenly disappeared. He is said to be a German baron."

"On the look-out for an advantageous marriage. The three millions sterling attracted him, I suppose!" I remarked.

"No. According to what I hear, he's a very wealthy man. The servants of the Villa say that one evening, after dinner, at which

the Baron dined alone with the pretty Clementine and her ugly old aunt, there was a terrific scene. The Parigina waxed furious and ordered the Baron out of the house. He obeyed very reluctantly, in order to avoid a scandal, but threatened retaliation, and the next day he disappeared from Rome. I knew him by sight at the Café Colonna, but he never spoke to any one, and kept himself very much to himself. He stayed at the 'Grand,' I believe."

"Oh, one hears so much tittle-tattle in this city that only half of it should be believed," I said. "It is even a more gossiping place than Florence, and that's saying a good deal."

Whereat my three companions laughed at my thoroughly English criticism.

The name of the dismissed German was Baron Stern, I was informed. The servants at the Villa Fiore had gossiped of it in the shops and in the cafés, so that the report was common property.

At the Peruzzi Palace, on the following night, I again beheld the popular Parisienne. The old Princess of the yellow face and discoloured teeth, entertained every Wednesday night, in the season, and her functions almost

approached royal splendour. Every one who was any one attended, and the receipt of cards was considered the hall-mark of the *haut monde*.

Dressed in pale blue, Mademoiselle presented a slim, rather diminutive figure, and the old Princess, who was about to introduce me, seemed somewhat surprised that we were already acquainted.

"Ah! my dear Signor Vesey," the Princess exclaimed, "what a knack you have of knowing every one! You have only been back a day or two, and you have already discovered our prettiest visitor in Rome this season. I thought I had a surprise in store for you!"

"For Lorenzo Castellani, you mean, Princess," I responded, in a low tone.

Her wrinkled face, rendered more aged by reason of the dazzling tiara upon her high-dressed hair, bore for an instant an expression of surprise. Then she tapped me approvingly with her fan and, grinning, said:

"You are really incorrigible, Signor Vesey. I am almost afraid of you."

"There's no need to be, I assure you, Princess," I laughed. "I am a changed man since I was last in these rooms of yours."

“Changed for the worse?” she suggested mischievously. “Go on and salute the pretty Parigina.”

I passed her and, struggling through the crowd, did as I was bid. Mademoiselle rose as I approached and smiled gaily as I bent over her outstretched hand.

She was superbly dressed, neat-waisted as the Parisienne only can be, and yet striking, without the daring of the *cocotte*. Her low-cut dress revealed a chest and arms white as alabaster, and as I seated myself at her side and began to talk, I noted that the only blemish was a curious mark like a dark red scar, at the back of her left shoulder, which was ill-concealed by her fluffy chiffons.

A man always knows when his presence is not unwelcome to a woman, and I could see, by the light in her eyes, that she, like all the others, was not averse to a mild flirtation. I judged her age to be about twenty-five, although, like most French girls, she looked a trifle older. In the coils of her dark hair sparkled a magnificent star of diamonds, while on her wrist was a bangle of the same gems, the finest I think I have ever seen upon a woman.

“My friend, Lorenzo, is not here this

evening," I remarked, in French, almost as soon as we were seated.

"No; he is unfortunately on duty. That's the worst of being a soldier, isn't it?"

"Well," I said, laughing, "duty sometimes serves a man as an excellent excuse for absence; although, in Lorenzo's case, I have no doubt he would be here if possible."

"You and he are old friends, M'sieur—— Pardon me, I have forgotten your name, although Lorenzo introduced us. I am so very stupid."

"Vesey," I replied, "Francis Vesey. Yes, when I was here three years ago, we were a good deal together."

"Ah! three years ago. He was not then promoted—only lieutenant."

"Exactly."

"He has been so very kind to my aunt and myself. Had it not been for him and his relatives, I fear we should have had a very dull time."

"But you have no chance to be dull now," I remarked. "I hear of you everywhere, at the palaces, at the Embassies, and even at the Quirinal!"

She laughed, admitting that she sometimes went to the Embassy receptions, and on two

occasions had attended the balls at the royal palace.

"The Countess de Suresnes is a friend of yours?" I hazarded.

"Oh, yes, my aunt has known her for years," was the reply. "It was most fortunate, for of course we could not have better introductions to the diplomatic set. Do you know any one at your own Embassy?"

"I know Lord Clancare slightly," I responded, laughing within myself. "But I'm somewhat of an outsider, you know," I added.

"I thought I understood from Lorenzo that you were always a welcome guest at the Embassy."

"Well," I said, altering my tactics instantly, "I may be, of course, but I don't ever boast of my social status. In England we don't consider it good form, mademoiselle."

"Ah, of course, I understand," she said, as though reassured, while on my part I wondered what my chattering friend Lorenzo had been telling her.

But we gossiped on, she telling me how much she preferred Rome to Paris, and how her aunt intended purchasing a villa in the vicinity of the city if she found one suitable.

"I have the Villa Fiore for two years,"

she said, "and I hope if my aunt sends you a card, you will come and see us. As Lorenzo's friend, I can assure you of a warm welcome. He yesterday spoke so enthusiastically about you."

"I'm sure I don't merit any eulogy, mademoiselle," I replied, bowing. "But I shall be most delighted to call, if I may."

Such invitation was, I knew, well coveted by a hundred men in Rome, therefore I was determined to accept it, knowing quite well that she had previously consulted Lorenzo.

Presently her aunt, Madame Dumont, a stout, elderly lady with grey hair and more than a suspicion of moustache upon her upper lip, waddled up and was introduced. Report had not lied. The old lady was one of those overbearing, squeaky-voiced, oleaginous Frenchwomen, of a somewhat loud and flashy type. She spoke snappily, with a provincial accent and appeared to view me, as a stranger, with distinct distrust. I put her down at once as a terrible ogress, only to be borne with on Clementine's account, and to be avoided on all possible occasions.

And my estimate, as will be seen later in this strange narrative of adventure, was pretty near the mark.

From the very moment of my introduction to Madame Dumont, I entertained a curious suspicion that the *ménage* of the Villa Fiore was a mysterious one.

CHAPTER XII

THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

THREE days later, when I returned to the hotel from my morning stroll, I found my friend, Captain Seymour Lucas, one of the King's Foreign Service Messengers, awaiting me.

"I've got a special despatch for you, old chap," he whispered to me, when there was no one in hearing. "Take me up to your room and sign the receipt."

We ascended together in the lift, and when alone he took from his pocket a sealed letter, addressed to me in the Marquess of Glinton's own hand.

"I came through from home with despatches for Lord Clancare and the Chief charged me to give that to you. What the dickens are you up to, living here under an assumed name. On a special mission, I suppose?"

"Guessed correctly," I responded, opening

the despatch and finding it written in that bewildering array of numerals and letters which constitute our diplomatic secret code.

Lucas noticed it, and remarked :

“ There’s a nice afternoon’s work there, old fellow. You’ll have to take it up to the Embassy and use their decipher book. But I say, do they keep decent whisky in this hotel ? ”

“ As fair as any in Rome. It’s all bad, except what the English import themselves,” and I rang and ordered my friend that peculiarly British refreshment, a whisky and soda.

Lucas was a merry, easy-going cosmopolitan, who had been in the Foreign Office service as special messenger for a dozen years or so, and who spent his life on the Continental railways, travelling to and fro, between London and the various capitals, bearing confidential despatches to the Embassies which it was unsafe and impolitic to entrust to the post. The half-dozen men who constitute this branch of the Foreign Office are unequalled in all the world as constant and ready travellers, and at the same time as hardy, thorough-going Englishmen.

“ Well, Jardine, old chap, here’s luck ! ” he exclaimed, when he lifted the glass to

me. "It was in Petersburg, six months ago, when we met last, wasn't it? I've been out to Teheran since then and found it a change after those infernal sleeping-cars."

Presently, after a brief chat, he rose and left, for he was compelled to return again to London that evening, bearing some important reports from Lord Clancare to Downing Street. Then I snatched a hurried lunch and took a cab to the Embassy.

Alone in his room, His Excellency unlocked the safe with the master-key upon his chain, and handed me the small blue-bound book which contained the key to the Foreign Office cipher, the most carefully guarded of all the books or documents of an Embassy. Taking it to a side table, I sat down, and having received from His Excellency the key letter, which is so frequently changed by despatch from London, I proceeded to render the letter from the Marquess into plain English.

This process is no easy one, as every diplomatist knows; for the cipher is not nearly so simple as it looks. When, however, I had pencilled each deciphered letter over its cipher equivalent, the whole despatch read as follows :

"DEAR JARDINE,

"Since you left London, a somewhat different complexion has been placed upon the affair by the Italian Ambassador's constant consultations with the Ambassador of Russia. It has also come to my knowledge that the object of your mission is known to some person in Rome, who means mischief. Who this person is, I am unable, at present, to inform you. As regards the main situation, it is in no way changed. I view the statement in Lord Clancare's despatch of the 23rd, regarding Vizardelli's interviews with the Count de Suresnes, with the greatest apprehension. Reports to me, from Paris, make it plain that the draft treaty has already been prepared at the Quai d'Orsay. Our informant, who is, as you know, in the employ of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was unfortunately unable to get sight of it. Do not, however, be disheartened. Act judiciously, and above all beware of the friends you make. Report to me privately at any time. It is a desperate game you are playing, I know, but remember what England must lose if you are beaten.

Yours,

"GLINTON."

I handed it to His Excellency, who read it through, shaking his head thoughtfully the while.

"I wonder how the Marquess knows of this secret enemy of yours?" he exclaimed.

"Very curious," I said, recollecting Clare's mysterious warning and his own ominous words.

"If I could only discover this enemy of mine, it would certainly facilitate matters. At present I've discovered nothing—absolutely nothing."

His Excellency shrugged his shoulders expressively, without remark. The effect of years of clever diplomacy had been swept away by one injudicious speech over at the Vatican, and, truth to tell, he was crushed and disheartened. He knew that France, our most formidable enemy, now held all the honours in the game.

Gordon, the first secretary, looked in while we were talking, but finding us in private consultation quickly went out again, while five minutes later the footman announced that Captain Lucas was waiting for despatches for London.

The messenger was ushered in, and three bulky sealed packets handed over to him by

His Excellency. Then, taking a sheet of official paper, the Ambassador hurriedly wrote a despatch for the Marquess's eyes alone. He placed it in an oblong envelope bearing a large blue cross, addressed to the Chief, and sealed it with his own private seal. While this was being done, the Captain took from beneath his waistcoat a soft chamois-leather belt, in which were several pockets. Into one of these he placed the despatch, readjusted the belt beneath his clothes, and with a merry "good day" to us, hurried out to catch the afternoon express for Calais. He had been in Rome just five hours. Such hard travelling as he constantly did would have killed any other man but a King's Messenger.

His Excellency was due to drive out with Lady Clancare, to make some calls. Therefore I left him and strolled away down the Via Venti Settembre, that fine broad thoroughfare, along one side of which stands the imposing façade of the Ministry of Finance.

The outlook was a black one. Again the war-cloud hung over Europe; once again had England's enemies cleverly plotted her downfall.

My own situation was both puzzling and

maddening. If I only knew where to write to Clare Stanway, I might perhaps obtain from her the identity of this secret enemy of whom every one seemed to warn me. The Siren of Sydenham was a murderess, it was true, still she was my friend, as I was hers. How I longed to be able to return to London and occupy myself with the solving of that strange mystery with which even the Home Office had occupied itself, to the length of obtaining a false verdict and thus throwing dust into the eyes of the public.

The whole affair was bewildering. Indeed the constant thoughts of that tragic affair in the dark suburban road occupied my mind to such an extent, that I somehow found myself unable to carry out the mission entrusted to me, with the care, caution and cunning that were necessary. I could form no plans: the veil of mystery was impenetrable.

I, alone and unaided, found my wits pitted against all the craft and secrecy of two of the cleverest diplomatists in Europe. How could I hope for success?

A couple of days later, I received from Madame Dumont a formal invitation to dine at the Villa Fiore, and went there with the certainty of spending a pleasant evening.

The big white house was one of the finest on the outskirts of Rome, an ideal Italian villa with well-kept gardens, marble terraces and green persiennes, or sun-shutters. You, my readers, who have driven up the *Passeggiata Margherita* over the Monte Gianicolo, know the place well, lying in the wooded hollow towards the Vatican.

The French flunkey ushered me in with all due ceremony, and in the great electrically-lit salon, my young hostess, sitting alone, rose to greet me. She was in cream, rather plainly dressed, and wearing no jewels, but her costume was tasteful and showed her neat figure to advantage.

Her aunt, she told me laughingly, was always late for dinner, and as she drew up a chair for me, she explained, in answer to my inquiry, that Lorenzo would not arrive until quite late—he was on duty at the barracks, as usual.

Now this assertion was somewhat curious, inasmuch as I had only that day learnt that my friend had been appointed upon a commission, and that he had been relieved of all barrack duty for six months. Castellani was a sad dog, where women were concerned, and was evidently deceiving her.

Need I describe how I made myself agreeable, and how I tried during dinner to remove the antipathy which Madame Dumont almost openly displayed towards me? I was the only guest, therefore the entertainment of two women who were so entirely opposed to each other in taste and temperament was, I confess, no easy task.

“Ah, m’sieur!” exclaimed the elder woman with a sigh, “for myself, I am tired of Rome and long to be back again in Paris, where I have so many friends.”

“But you both have hosts of friends here,” I remarked.

The pair exchanged glances—rather curious glances.

“Yes,” responded Madame to me, in a half-hearted manner, “but after all, they are merely acquaintances.”

Now in that expression I detected some hidden meaning, but what it was, I could not correctly determine.

The meal was served with princely splendour, and as we chatted, I could not conceal from myself the fact that my pretty hostess was endeavouring to attract me by those peculiarly feminine graces that are only put forth in the presence of the opposite sex.

Both aunt and niece seemed also to be particularly anxious to learn something about my past. They inquired if I knew one person and the other, this place and that. Had I been to Aix or to Monte Carlo; did I spend the summer in Switzerland, or at the seaside; was I acquainted with Berlin, Vienna, or Petersburg? Indeed, all their clever questions seemed directed to one point, namely, who and what I really was.

But my profession as secret agent had long ago taught me carefully to conceal my past. I never volunteered any information, save to mislead people into believing in my honesty of purpose. Thus, for an hour or more, I successfully evaded all attempts to penetrate my disguise, at the same time, however, becoming aware that they were a pair of exceedingly clever women.

At length, when dinner was concluded, I led Clementine back to the salon, where coffee was handed to us, and almost immediately afterwards the gilded doors were thrown open and a servant announced:

“His Excellency, the Minister Vizardelli.”

What a stroke of good fortune, I thought. I should now be introduced to the very man

I most desired to know—the man who held the secret!

He advanced across the room, an elderly, grey-haired man, with thin, sharp features and a pair of quick, shifty grey eyes, and, bending over the young Frenchwoman's hand, said, in Italian:

"Pardon me, mademoiselle, for coming to pay my respects to you at this hour, but, as you know, my time is so fully occupied."

"Pray don't mention it, Signor Marchese," she replied, in the same language. "You know quite well you are always welcome here. I told you so, when you called with the Marchesa, a month ago. I am so often at your house and yet you never come to me. Let me introduce my English friend, the Signor Vesey."

We bowed, and the Minister said, in a gracious tone:

"I am extremely happy to make the Signore's acquaintance."

Then he seated himself and we all four began to chat.

That man, who at that moment held the future of Italy in his hands, was an adventurer. All Italy knew it. A Neapolitan of humble birth, his early life was hidden in obscurity.

He had made a little money somehow, became deputy for Palermo, led a dissatisfied faction in the Chamber, and at last, a year ago, his fellow adventurers called upon him to occupy the post of Foreign Minister in as corrupt a Cabinet as ever put their wits together to rob a nation.

The King knew it, just as the people knew it. But he was powerless in the matter, just as the people were powerless. The Italians are a long-suffering race. *Chi dice parlamento, disce guastamento* is one of their old proverbs.

Although I made myself as affable towards the Minister as possible, in view of our future relations, I instinctively disliked him, and the more so, I think, because he evidently regarded my presence there as an intrusion. Though outwardly a respectable gentleman, the crafty adventurer was shown in his eyes. He never looked one straight in the face, and had the Hebrew habit of now and then rubbing his knees when seated in conversation.

As I talked with him, my mind was occupied with the manner in which to use my acquaintanceship to best advantage. Presently, when he rose and took his leave, reluctantly as it seemed, Clementine escorted

him outside the room and there, before the arrival of the servant, exchanged a few hurried words that I could not distinguish.

She returned to me immediately he had bidden her farewell, and as she reseated herself I noticed, for the first time, that at her throat, half concealed by the lace edging of her bodice, she wore a curious golden scarabæus, about the size of a shilling, suspended by a fine gold chain.

"What a pretty charm!" I exclaimed. "I suppose you wear it always, to avert the Evil Eye, or something? Is it ancient?"

"Oh, no!" she laughed. "Only a copy of one in the Louvre museum. Thiebauts, in the Avenue de L'Opéra, made it for me. See, it is a locket," and taking it in her hand she opened it, displaying a small photograph.

In an instant I recognized the face, for the features were already too deeply graven upon my memory.

It was the picture of Clare Stanway's mysterious victim—the portrait of the dead man, White!

CHAPTER XIII

BY ROYAL COMMAND

FORTUNATELY my young hostess did not notice my expression of blank amazement. Instantly I concealed the fact that I recognized the portrait that she carried in such secrecy and which was apparently one of her greatest treasures. A woman often carries the portrait of her lover hidden beneath her bodice, and such this appeared to me to be.

"What a neat and very unusual charm!" I remarked admiringly, turning the golden scarabæus over in my hands and re-examining the portrait. Yes, there was no mistake! It was a photograph, and a recent one, of the man I had found dead in London!

"The portrait is well taken, too," I added. "The picture of a friend, I presume?" I inquired laughing.

"Yes."

"Of a very intimate friend, eh?"

"Really, m'sieur," she laughed reprovingly, "you are too inquisitive! You ought not

to ask such questions," and she closed the little locket with a snap.

"My natural curiosity," I declared apologetically. "A portrait so treasured must be that of a very valued acquaintance."

"Ah! you are both logical and philosophical," she remarked with that airy humour that was one of her chief characteristics. A millionaire's daughter is allowed many more graces than is a penniless girl.

"If I were Lorenzo, I should be jealous of that little ornament," I said mischievously.

She raised her eyebrows quickly, regarding me with some surprise.

"Why should he be, pray? Am I not my own mistress?"

"Well," I stammered, "I have heard everywhere in Rome that he is devoted to you, and I was about to congratulate him."

"Oh, that is quite unnecessary, I assure you," she responded with slight hauteur. "We are friends, and he has been extremely kind to my aunt and myself, but that is all."

"Because of the original of that photograph?" I ventured to suggest, still treating the subject as one for joking.

A slight flush suffused her well-moulded

cheeks, and I saw that her woman's pride obtained the mastery and betrayed her into admission of the truth.

"You can believe whatever you like, m'sieur—except that Lorenzo Castellani is my lover. I deny that, and he shall deny it too, if he has led you to believe it."

She seemed annoyed that he should have allowed anyone to suspect their mutual affection, or that it had formed the subject of gossip in the city.

"Are we not sufficiently friendly that I should know the gentleman's name?" I asked, not without some trepidation.

"Surely it can be of no interest to you, M'sieur Vesey," she answered, fixing her fine eyes upon me. They had in them all the sparkle of the true daughter of Paris.

"Oh, but it is. I will be as secret as the grave, if you so desire."

"Secret—ah!" she sighed, and then for a few moments paused in reflection, holding the little ornament in her hand. "If you only knew the truth regarding this portrait, you would be much astounded. It has a strange inviolable secret connected with it—a souvenir of the tragedy of my life."

Her words and manner surprised me. In

her eyes shone the light of unshed tears, therefore, in the hope that she would tell me more, I uttered words of condolence and encouragement. But she was quite as full of tact and ingenuity as myself, and, discerning my intention, carefully refrained from making any further admission. It seemed as though she had been on the actual point of confiding to me the story of the locket and of the original of the portrait, yet, on reflection, had deemed it injudicious to impart the truth to a comparative stranger.

She hid the locket away again beneath the lace edging of her bodice, where she kept it concealed, and with the re-entry of old Madame Dumont, commenced to chatter gaily upon other subjects.

The puzzle was maddening. Here in Rome, a thousand miles from the scene of that strange suburban tragedy, was a woman wearing in secret the portrait of the victim, treasuring it as though he were her lover and yet denying that such was the fact. As I sat there mechanically taking part in the conversation, I pondered over the consequences if I boldly told her the story of her friend's mysterious death.

Perhaps, however, she knew of it, for had

she not spoken of it as a souvenir of the tragedy of her life—whatever that might be.

And so I rose and took leave of her, utterly mystified, yet determined to probe to the bottom her connection with the man White, whom some declared to be of "Eastern duskiness," while I myself knew him to be an Englishman.

Daily, nay hourly, my conscience smote me that I was neglecting my duty to King and country. Long ago I had taken the oath to serve them, and had served them abroad, in many lands. But with the balance of my mind overturned by the remarkable mystery into which my admiration for a chance-met woman had led me, I was unable either to formulate plans or design projects.

Hither and thither I went about in Rome, through the days that followed my visit to the Villa Fiore. Once or twice Clementine drove past me, nodding and smiling. She was a woman whose secret I longed to learn, for would it not give me a clue to the tragedy in that suburban road in far-off London?

I noticed that she now wore deep black whenever I met her in the streets. Was it mourning for the man whom she denied was

her lover? Was she aware of his mysterious death?

Lorenzo danced attendance upon her constantly. We met often in the cafés, or in the Corso, and he told me of pleasant evenings he spent with her. That she was his ideal, I was well aware, but if what she had told me were true, his love was entirely unreciprocated. Like so many of her sex, she was merely amusing herself by allowing him to admire her. The Italian is always ultra-demonstrative in his love.

I learnt one evening while chatting to one of my friend's brother officers in the Aragno, that Lorenzo had been extremely lucky, for some months ago he had been promoted to an important office in the Ministry of War, although he still retained his place in his regiment. It was strange, I thought, that he had never told me of this good fortune, but there might be a reason for it, I reflected. Perhaps he had no wish that his promotion should be known outside. He was, I knew, somewhat eccentric in his ideas regarding favours from his superiors.

Time crept on. Each occasion I saw Lord Clancare he seemed more than ever anxious regarding the secret negotiations between

Italy and France. Both the arch-adventurer the Minister Vizardelli, and the Count de Suresnes carefully avoided him, and it was now known to the representatives of all other Powers that the situation in the Mediterranean was growing extremely serious.

The stay-at-home Englishman is entirely ignorant of the difficulties of British diplomacy on the Continent, or of the unscrupulous enemies which we have daily to face. Nations, jealous of our prosperity, are ever plotting our downfall; known spies flock into England and yet we receive them; great armies are drilling daily in expectation of a struggle with us, and in every foreign navy yard, swift ships, destroyers and submarines, are being built for one purpose—to some day overthrow our naval supremacy. Yet peace is still preserved by the calm, steady policy pursued by our representatives at the various Courts of Europe, that small band of Ambassadors and Ministers upon whom the weight of anxiety is ever pressing, and of whom the country knows so very little. To the British public the names of its Ambassadors are hardly known. The man-in-the-street is quite unaware of the clever, shrewd, and self-sacrificing men who

are for ever foiling the attempts of hostile nations, ever living upon the edge of a volcano. They know nothing, and unfortunately they care less. British diplomacy always seeks to efface itself; it is one of the tenets of the Foreign Office to attract no attention.

The diplomatist is often condemned for his pessimistic view of the future. But who is in a better position to know the truth than the man who spends his life within the inner circle of a foreign capital? Napoleon, Bismarck, Beaconsfield and Crispi have all foretold the invasion of England. In other matters they have not been false prophets, but in this let us hope they will prove to be. The chancelleries of Europe, those store-houses of secret service, are full of reports of England's weakness, of her vulnerable points, and of her fatal unpreparedness for war.

One evening, after dinner, I was seated in the smoking-room of the hotel, listening to the rather loud talk of a pair of tourists from the Western States, when a waiter handed me a note from the Embassy, asking me to go there with all speed.

When, a quarter of an hour later, I alighted from a cab, and was ushered into the presence

of His Excellency, I found him in full uniform, apparently awaiting me.

"Jardine," he explained briefly, "the King desires to see you."

"To see me!" I gasped, in blank surprise. "But I'm not in uniform. I can't go."

"You must. A messenger came from the Palace saying that His Majesty desired to give you audience at half-past nine. He knows you, and will excuse you not being in uniform. Come; we have no time to lose."

His Excellency's brougham was awaiting us, and during our drive to the Quirinal I inquired the reason of the royal command.

"I don't know at all," was his response. "I told His Majesty, in confidence, the other day, that you were in Rome, and he appeared much interested—that was all. Recollect that while the Ministers are bitterly hostile to England, His Majesty is our firm friend."

During the remainder of our drive, I reflected upon the character of the man I was about to meet. It had been said that Victor Emmanuel III. much resembled the German Emperor. In one phase of his character, and in only one, was the resemblance—in his supreme strength of will. He had ascended the throne a year ago, on the day of the

cruel murder of his father, Humbert, and at that moment big with events. Unknown until that day, Italy suddenly recognized with tumultuous delight that a man of discerning mind, with unbending will and the courage of a race of daring soldiers, had ascended the throne. His very first proclamation had a ring in it which suggested his great-grandfather, Carlo Alberto, who said on his death bed : " At least I have not died as Kings die," and his first speech to his rabble, ill-assorted Parliament, completely carried away not only the Senators and Deputies, but the Ambassadors and the nobles who were watching, with ill-concealed weariness, what they expected to be a splendid scene. That speech is historical. " Sacred was the word of the magnanimous Carlo Alberto, who granted liberty," he said ; " sacred that of my great ancestor who accomplished the union of Italy ; sacred also the word of my august father, who in every act of his life showed himself worthy of the virtues of the Padre della Patria. Splendour and grace were lent to the work of my father by my august and venerated mother, who planted in my heart and imprinted on my mind feelings of princely and Italian duty. Even thus, to my work will

be joined that of my august consort, who, born of a strong race, will dedicate herself entirely to the country of her adoption. . . . May Monarchy and Parliament go hand in hand . . . Unabashed and steadfast I ascend the throne, conscious of my rights and of my duties as a King. Let Italy have faith in me, as I have faith in the destinies of our country, and no human force shall destroy that which with such self-sacrifice our fathers builded. It is necessary to keep watch and to employ every living force to guard intact the great conquests of unity and of liberty. The serenest trust in our liberal charter will never fail me, and I shall not be wanting either in strong initiative or in energy of action in vigorously defending our glorious institutions, precious heritage from our great dead. Brought up in the love of Religion and of the Fatherland, I take God to witness my promise that from this day forward I offer my heart, my mind, my life to the grandeur of our land."

As each sentence of that ringing manifesto came forth, the enthusiasm of the audience rose higher and higher till the King was almost inaudible. Sounds of weeping were heard on all sides, and as the assemblage dispersed,

the general feeling was expressed in the sentence of a popular Deputy—"the master has come." Italy by her representative men acknowledged and welcomed the presence of a King.

His first words from the throne inspired his people with confidence, and produced the impression that if civil war were to be prevented and the monarchy saved, he was the person to do it.

A great worker, never a day was allowed to pass without his reading the papers of the extreme factions, often making notes and comments with his own hand. His subordinates were astonished when he gave orders that all decrees requiring his signature must be presented to him three days beforehand, in order that he might master their contents. In this way he studied and controlled everything before giving to any act—even the most insignificant—the sanction of his approval and sign-manual.

The carriage swerved into the gateway of the Palace and the guards, recognizing the British coat-of-arms upon the panels, drew up and saluted.

Then, on alighting, we were at once ushered along the great handsome corridors to the

audience chamber, a high magnificent salon, with white walls, many mirrors and gilt silk-covered settees, in Louis XV. style, running around its three sides. In the centre of the brilliant apartment hung a great crystal chandelier with electric lamps in the sconces where, in old days, had burned waxen candles, and below stood a circular divan, as an oasis in the desert of rich pile carpet,

In the centre, beside the divan, we stood awaiting His Majesty.

CHAPTER XIV

KING AND SPY

BESIDE His Excellency I remained in silence, admiring the splendour of the audience-chamber.

For a few minutes we stood there, when of a sudden the heavy velvet portières of the central entrance opposite us were drawn aside, the white doors opened, and a royal servant with the silver chain of office about his neck announced in a loud voice, in Italian :

“ His Majesty the King ! ”

Behind him came Victor Emmanuel in plain evening dress, with no other sign of his

exalted position as ruler of thirty millions of people save the ribbon and cross of Savoy at his throat. He came along with almost impatient stride, and as he bowed he held forth his hand to the British Ambassador, saying, in perfect English :

“ Ah ! My Lord Clancare. It is extremely good of you to come here so quickly at my request. I expect you had other engagements.”

“ Whatever engagements I may have,” responded the courtly diplomat, “ I am at all times at your Majesty’s service.” Then he added : “ Permit me to present Captain Jardine, of the Confidential Department of our Foreign Office.”

I bowed, but, quickly throwing aside etiquette, the King at once recognized me, exclaiming :

“ We have met before, Captain Jardine, about three years ago, I believe, when I was still Prince,” and he smiled pleasantly. “ I am very pleased to welcome you back to Rome. Lord Clancare told me you were here, and it was to speak to you upon a very confidential matter which concerns us mutually that I asked him to bring you here this evening. In such circumstances I think we can dispense with ceremony. Come with me

to my private cabinet." And he led the way out of one of the six long doors of the State chamber along a thickly-carpeted corridor with several turnings until we entered a cosy, oak-panelled room, with littered writing-table—the study of a busy man.

Near the table stood an armchair, and lying in it was a piece of needlework, which told plainly that the young Queen herself was his constant companion during his working hours, sewing in silence while he wrote, and giving her womanly advice when he sought it in dealing with the affairs of his nation.

He was a pleasant man, with all the stately manner of a born monarch, and yet without any air of superiority. Indeed, I had not been seated in that room five minutes before I was at perfect ease, talking as freely as though I were in consultation with His Excellency in his own room at the Embassy. He had a keen sense of humour, and although it was afterwards apparent that he was seriously disturbed, yet he exhibited no outward sign of anything unusual.

"As I believe you are well aware, Captain Jardine, we have at this moment a very difficult position to grapple with," His Majesty commenced, when he had ordered us to be

seated. He himself remained half sitting on the edge of his big writing-table between His Excellency and myself. "I have given Lord Clancare several private audiences of late, and we have discussed the matter thoroughly. Only a few days ago he mentioned to me that you were here at the orders of your most esteemed Foreign Minister, the Marquess of Glinton, and were endeavouring to discover the exact progress of the negotiations between my Minister Vizardelli and the Quai d'Orsay. You are a secret agent," and he laughed as he uttered the words. "Now it would never do for the fact of our meeting this evening to leak out; therefore, I beg of you to regard it, and all that I am about to explain, as absolutely confidential."

"Your Majesty has my word of honour of strictest secrecy," I answered. "I trust that my present mission is in the best interests of Italy, as well as those of England."

"There you have just touched the exact point upon which I desired to speak," he exclaimed, twisting his slight moustache, which has the same upward and bristly trend as had his lamented father's. "As Lord Clancare is well aware, I repeat to you, in confidence, that my personal sympathies are all with England,

and in favour of a defensive alliance with your country. My Ministers apparently think otherwise, and are on the point of accepting the olive branch held out by France. I am but a King, Captain Jardine," he sighed. "Would that at this moment I were one of the people, and I would make my voice heard against this attempted betrayal of my country. I mean that Italy shall once more hold the high place among the nations to which she is entitled by her great past history, and it is only your country, England, who can help her to do so. I look to you, Lord Clancare," he added, earnestly, "and to you, Captain Jardine, to assist me in this great crisis. Without your help I can do nothing."

"We are both eager and ready to be of assistance if we knew how, your Majesty," the Ambassador answered, while upon the King's face I saw a grave, determined expression, the index to an energetic temperament, coupled with a will of iron.

It was to the influence of those words he spoke to Giantorco, Keeper of the Seals, that a trend towards real justice was due, a justice which, up to that date, had been conspicuous by its absence. It was to his words that the work of severe and inflexible cleansing of

that Augean stable, the Casale trials, was due ; and to the same source might be traced the famous Palizzoli trial. The words and deeds of the new King had already caused the third Italy to fix her last and greatest hope upon him ; and he, in return, had inspired his people with respect and esteem.

“ You, Captain Jardine, are here, in my capital, to discover how far the secret diplomatic negotiations have progressed, and the terms of France’s offer to us,” he said presently, turning to me. “ I ought to discountenance spies, but in the present case your success will mean the salvation of my nation. If, on the other hand, the treaty with France is effected, I can do naught else but approve of it. Public opinion, aroused against England by that unfortunate speech at the Vatican, has tied my hands. Were I to refuse to give my consent to the French alliance, civil war might result. Do you follow my difficulty ? ”

“ Entirely,” I answered. “ And I thank your Majesty for your generous expressions of good-will towards us, which I hasten to assure you are very warmly reciprocated in England.”

“ England and Italy have all to gain by an alliance. We must rule the Mediterranean

jointly if the peace of Europe is to be assured. Hence it behoves both you and me to do what we can to nullify the growing influence of France. So well kept is the secret of these negotiations that even I myself am unable to learn anything definite from Vizardelli, who, as you may know, was not a Minister of my choice. He keeps me in ignorance, knowing that when the plot is accomplished I dare not, in face of the anti-English feeling, refuse my consent."

"I have done my best to find some means of obtaining information," I said, "but, as your Majesty is well aware, the difficulties in the present case seem absolutely insurmountable. The only men in Rome who know the truth are your Majesty's Minister and the French Ambassador."

The King bit his lip. He had always disliked Count de Suresnes from the first day he had presented his credentials at the Quirinal. For France, Victor Emmanuel had never entertained any favour, even from childhood, and now that the greater power was trying to undermine England's prestige in the Mediterranean, his anger was undisguised.

True it is that a king's crown does not save him from headache.

By his manner I could see that he wished to speak with me privately, and a hint he presently dropped caused Lord Clancare to suggest his own withdrawal, to which His Majesty made no objection. Therefore His Excellency passed into the inner room, and we were left alone.

“Captain Jardine,” exclaimed His Majesty, returning to me and fixing his keen eyes on mine, “the real reason I invited you here was to ask you several questions. My position should forbid me making the inquiries, yet the great interests we mutually have at stake warrant them. First I must tell you that the reports of my own secret service in the various capitals are regularly placed before me by the chancellerie, and from them I have learnt much that is happening in other countries. My Ministers at first endeavoured to blind me to the truth, but the reports of the secret service do not lie. Now it was from those reports that I first became aware some months ago that you, whom I had met while Prince, were an agent of the British Government. Your name was mentioned in connection with a successful coup you made in secretly obtaining a breech of the famous French Berthier rifle.”

"What!" I exclaimed, "is that known? I thought only our War Office and myself were aware of it!"

"It was reported by one of my agents in Paris," replied His Majesty. "Apparently he was engaged in the same scheme, but you outwitted him. Let me see," he continued, taking from the table a sheet of paper covered with memoranda, "you went under the name of Bernard Barry, representative of the Maison Galli, of Lyons, did you not?"

"I did," I replied, amazed that he should be acquainted with the truth.

"Your Ambassador has told me that I may place every trust in you," he went on, "but first I would ask you to reply honestly to my question."

"I will do that most willingly," I responded.

He was silent for a moment, his eyes still fixed upon me as though he would read my innermost thoughts.

"Tell me, Captain Jardine," he said, "did you not meet in London recently a lady who gave you her name as Stanway—Clare Stanway?"

His question nonplussed me. I think that, even well-trained as I am not to betray surprise, I must have gone pale to the lips. What could His Majesty possibly know of her?

"I—well, yes," I stammered. "I did certainly meet a lady of that name some few months ago."

"And she mystified you regarding who and what she was?"

"She did."

"Pray, Captain Jardine, forgive me for apparently prying into your affairs, but it is of necessity. You became attracted by her beauty, did you not?"

"Yes," I laughed, "I fell in love with her."

"And yet you know nothing of her past! That was rather injudicious, was it not?"

"Even a spy may commit an error of judgment where a pretty woman is concerned, your Majesty," I remarked, without seeking to excuse myself.

"That is admitted. All of us are but human. Nevertheless, you are now well aware that you committed a folly—eh?"

Was he alluding to the tragedy, I wondered? Surely he could not be aware of that. If so, he probably suspected me of the murder.

"It was certainly folly," I said briefly.

"And where is the lady at present?"

"I know nothing of her whereabouts. We parted in London on the evening before I left."

"What?" exclaimed the King, in surprise. "Are you actually in ignorance of where she is? I believed that you alone could tell me."

"I regret very much that she always concealed her address from me, and that I have never known it."

"She played you false, then," he remarked in dissatisfaction.

"Yes, she did."

"H'm," he ejaculated. "If you had been a little more wary, Captain Jardine, she might have assisted us at this critical moment. To obtain the secret you desire and thus thwart the enemies of your country and of mine, it is necessary that you first discover the mysterious woman who has apparently held you beneath her spell." Then he added, with that decisive gesture which showed him to be a true-born King: "We must find her, you and I. Spare no effort, and I myself will assist you by every means in my power. We must work together in secret, for not a soul must know that king and spy are hand-in-glove. But it is for my country's honour, and for England's peace. She must be found—you understand. It is imperative that she should betray the secret which she holds!"

CHAPTER XV

IN WHICH I MAKE A COMPACT

THE King flung himself into a chair and glanced through some neatly written memoranda, evidently made from the confidential reports presented at his orders from the chancellerie.

He passed his hand over his closely-cropped hair, and there was a puzzled expression upon his countenance. Many things, he admitted to me, were veiled in mystery.

"Is your Majesty acquainted with the lady who calls herself Stanway?" I inquired, when he had finished studying the sheets of notes.

"No," he answered, in a voice almost snappish, "but I have her photograph here." And he took from the table a large cartridge envelope, the seal of which he broke—the royal seal that had been placed there with his own hand—and withdrew a cabinet portrait, which he handed to me.

Yes; the picture was a beautifully-finished

platinotype of the mysterious girl, in a handsome evening gown. The name of the photographer was, however, absent, so there was no clue as to where it had been taken.

"A most excellent likeness—and quite a recent one, I should say," was my comment.

But His Majesty seemed wrapped in thought; his brow was dark, and his nervous fingers toyed with the jewelled cross at his throat.

Two facts seemed to strangely coincide. I recollected that the victim of the tragedy in London was supposed by Scotland Yard to be a spy, and now His Majesty had given me to understand that Clare herself was in possession of means by which I could learn the international secret.

Had I not given her my word to conceal her connection with the crime I would there and then have made a clean breast of the matter. But, as I have already confessed to you, even though she were guilty of murder, I still loved her. Every hour of the day I thought of her, living over again those blissful moments when I had walked the dark and lonely suburban roads and she had chatted to me in that sweet, musical voice I knew so well.

Why she had enveloped herself in mystery

so completely I failed to conjecture. There was a reason, of course—a strong reason—but what that motive had been was entirely hidden.

Again the King spoke, expressing serious doubts regarding the successful issue of my mission. Indeed, how could I hope to succeed when Vizardelli kept the truth from his royal master? The Minister was working for his own ends, yet His Majesty was unable, in view of the anti-English feeling in Italy, to dismiss him from office.

On my part I made a sudden resolve, and, without speaking of the death of the man, White, I told the King all I knew regarding Clare.

"You must seek to discover her," he repeated with seriousness. "She must be found."

"And if found, can she give me any valuable information?" I inquired.

"If you find her your difficulties will, no doubt, be diminished," he said. "Remember I can tell you nothing regarding her. I have surmised, that is all. For some time past my secret agents throughout Europe have been in search of her, but without avail. She seems to have disappeared

as completely as if the earth had swallowed her."

"Had she any male companion—any lover, for instance?"

"She may have had, for aught I know. The fact is not mentioned in the reports to the chancelleries. It is seldom that a pretty woman like her remains unloved."

"Well," I said, "I am entirely at your Majesty's disposal in this matter. It is for Italy, as much as for England, that we must, by means fair or foul, prevent Italy's betrayal into the hands of her enemies. Lord Glinton, in giving me instructions, was very anxious about the future, and expressed the greatest friendship towards your Majesty's kingdom. Hence, if you have any suggestions to offer, I am ready at once to adopt them."

He remained thoughtful for a few moments.

"You parted from this mysterious woman in London," he said at last. "You should return there at once, and endeavour to pick up the lost thread. To discover anything in Rome is impossible. First re-discover your enchantress. Then act with discretion. If you wish to consult me, hand your letter to my Ambassador, to whom I will give in-

structions. It will be forwarded to me under seal by special messenger."

I took a card from my case—one bearing my private address in Great Russell Street—and handed it to him, saying :

" I beg of your Majesty to note my own address, where any confidential communication may be forwarded."

" Certainly. Then you will leave for London in the morning ? "

" Yes. But as I have a free hand in this matter, I shall not even report myself to the Foreign Office. I am supposed to be in Rome, and here I shall officially remain."

" Very well," he said. " To Lord Clancare you may explain what I have told you, and my suggestion. To all others, recollect that no word regarding this consultation passes your lips. Find the woman, Stanway, and I wish you every good fortune in your search. If you are successful, you will, I believe, be also successful in the secret mission entrusted to you by Lord Glinton."

Then His Majesty went himself to the inner room, and with apologies, recalled Lord Clancare.

" You know, my good friend," he said, " the matter was one upon which I desired

to consult Captain Jardine, and had a personal element. He will tell you at what conclusion we have arrived. He intends to return to London in the morning to endeavour to take up a broken thread. Meanwhile both you and I must be wary of De Suresnes and his ingenious dealings with Vizardelli."

"I am reporting to your Majesty daily all that I know," answered the Ambassador, "and I can only hope that Captain Jardine may be successful."

"We must find that woman, Clancare," he declared in a decisive tone. "You recollect what I told you the other day?"

So it was from His Majesty that the Ambassador had learnt of the existence of Clare Stanway!

"Can your Majesty tell me the lady's real name?" I asked.

King and Ambassador exchanged meaning glances which puzzled me, arousing within me the feeling that they were in possession of certain knowledge which they intended to withhold from me.

"No," answered the sovereign, "she goes by the name of Stanway, it appears."

"I presume that I may have loan of the photograph?" I asked, for, truth to tell,

I much desired a picture of the erring woman whom I loved so well. You, reader, may think it strange that I entertained affection for a murderess, but surely it is not so remarkable as it at first appears. When a man is entirely enchanted by a woman, her vices are to him but virtues. Think of the thousands of men who have what is vulgarly termed "gone to the dogs," because of the evil that women do.

"There is no objection whatever to your taking the portrait," replied the King, "but I wish for its return."

And taking up the envelope containing it, he tore off his private seal in order that his connection with the affair should not be betrayed.

If his own secret agents scattered in the capitals of Europe—some of them, as I knew, the most astute men on the Continent—had failed to discover Clare even at a time when I was openly meeting her in and about Sydenham, why had he, I wondered, invoked my aid? Perhaps because his chancellerie had reported on my success in the affair of the Berthier rifle, and he therefore believed me to possess greater powers of penetration and more ingenuity than I really did.

At that moment one of the royal chamberlains, obtaining permission to enter, announced to his master that His Excellency, the Minister Vizardelli, was in attendance and awaited the royal pleasure.

The King frowned, and a sign of displeasure crossed his face.

"To-morrow," he said, impatiently, "I will give him audience at noon." And the man was dismissed with a gesture.

Then, turning to Lord Clancare, he said :

"Both the Minister and the Count de Suresnes have accepted invitations to the dinner here to-morrow night. It would be better, I think, if you, my lord, declined."

"I thank your Majesty for the information, and in the circumstances decline your kind hospitality."

The King smiled. It was curious to give an invitation and then advise its non-acceptance, but in diplomacy there are ever intricate wheels within wheels. The absence of Lord Clancare would be a sign of England's disapproval of those secret negotiations with France that were no secret.

"Captain Jardine is to be still officially in Rome," the King explained to the Ambassador. "He is only returning to London at

my suggestion, for I feel that the person we wish to find is in hiding in your own metropolis, which is always said to be the best place of concealment in the world. So he does not intend to report to his Chief, but work independently, and he may, if necessary, invoke the aid of my own agents in London. There are three of them, and their addresses will be furnished by the Embassy. You see, my dear Clancare," he added, "I make no secret that I have spies even in your own camp, just as you have in mine."

And we all three laughed in chorus, for the employment of spies is now-a-days recognized as part and parcel of diplomacy. Every diplomat will testify to the fact, that in at least three or four cases, the early information obtained by the secret agents of England, has been the means of turning the tide of political events, and securing the peace of Europe that might otherwise have been seriously imperilled.

Presently, after a further conversation regarding the outlook, we bowed, and His Majesty shook my hand in farewell, saying :

"Spare neither time nor trouble in this matter, Captain Jardine. Recollect all that both your country and mine have at stake,

and also recollect that this missing woman can give you a clue to the truth. Good-night, and good luck."

"I thank your Majesty for your kind expressions," I answered fervently, much impressed by his kind manner and the utter absence of any kingly imperiousness. "I will do my very best."

And with Lord Clancare I went out, being led by a chamberlain through the great audience-chamber and the throne-room, with its royal seat under the daïs beneath the wonderful golden canopy, thence into a maze of corridors to the exit where our carriage was awaiting us, and where the sentinels saluted as we drove out again into the great piazza.

CHAPTER XVI

LONDON AGAIN

It was an ugly affair, to say the least of it.

Three nights later I found myself again in my "grandfather" chair in Great Russell Street, enjoying the warmth of a good fire and gazing wonderingly upon the photograph of the woman who had disappeared into such utter obscurity.

I felt out of sorts. The train-de-luxe which runs twice a week direct between Rome and Calais had been crowded to excess, and I had been compelled to be an occupant of a four-berth compartment, which, to my mind, is the height of travelling discomfort. There is not much luxury on the so-called luxurious train, save the luxury of paying heavily for one's "supplement." The crossing, too, had been an abominable one, and we had been nearly three hours late at Charing Cross, facts which, to a constant and punctilious traveller like myself, all combined to put me out of temper.

But I was back again in London, back in my old room with its family heirlooms in the form of furniture and the bits of old silver on the sideboard. Outside, it rained as it always should do in London in winter, the familiar, wheezy, old man was crying hot potatoes—a relic of London's street cries—and the cab bells tinkled merrily above the patter of the rain.

Where, among all the crowded millions of London, could she be? That was the one thought which occupied my mind as I gazed long and thoughtfully upon that smiling pictured face that had so charmed me, that

countenance more perfect than any I had ever seen before, even though I had trod the drawing-rooms of diplomatic Europe and prided myself upon being a connoisseur of beauty.

To me, it appeared that before I commenced my difficult search I should know exactly what had been discovered by the police. Sir Henry Monkhouse was the man who knew the whole of the facts; therefore, aroused to immediate activity by the recollection of the King's words, I took a cab and drove to the Home Secretary's house in Curzon Street.

The card I sent in proved an effective passport, for I was at once shown to the library, and in a few moments the tall, erect, clean-shaven chief of His Majesty's Home Department entered.

"Ah! Captain Jardine!" he exclaimed, in some surprise. "I thought you were in Rome."

"I only returned this evening, Sir Henry, and have come at once to consult you," I replied. Then, when we were seated, I briefly told him of the futility of my mission to Italy, and of my suspicion, that the dead man, White, was in some way connected with the important affair I had in hand. I said

nothing of Clare Stanway, for I had not mentioned her at my last interview.

"I have read the papers," I said, "and have noticed with gratification how very carefully my connection with the affair was expunged, and how the jury gave a verdict of accidental death."

"Yes," he smiled, "we didn't want to arouse public interest in the affair. It is all a profound mystery. The man was somehow poisoned. At Scotland Yard they've been making the most searching inquiries. Munday, the man who first gave us a clue to the fact that the dead man was a secret agent of a foreign Government, has had the matter in hand, but as far as the reports furnished to me carry it, he has discovered little or nothing—save one fact."

"And what is that?" I inquired eagerly.

"That there was a woman in it."

"A woman!" I gasped. "What was her name?"

"Stanton, or something like that," he answered. "I don't exactly remember. The reports are all at Whitehall."

I fear my face must have betrayed some excitement, although I endeavoured not to show it.

"What, do you mean that she was actually implicated in the man's death?"

"Ah! That is not yet made plain. You should see Munday. He's one of the sharpest men in the Department, and he's working night and day at the case."

"If you'll give me a line to him, Sir Henry, I'll esteem it a great favour," I said. "As you know, I have no desire that Scotland Yard should become aware of my real profession. Lord Glinton does not wish it."

"Of course. I quite understand," he said. And turning in his chair to the table, he scribbled me a line of introduction to the detective, adding that he could speak to me regarding the Sydenham Mystery in all confidence.

"But this woman?" I said, returning to the point which most interested me. "Was it Munday who discovered her?"

"Ah! That I don't quite know," he replied, in the sharp, quick voice habitual to him. "See him. He'll tell you all about it. All I know is that the affair is a most puzzling one, and the reports themselves read like a romance. As one who has had a good deal of experience at the Bar, in both

defending and prosecuting criminals, I am extremely interested in it myself."

"And I, also, but from quite a different point of view," I remarked. Then presently I took leave of Sir Henry and returned again to my rooms.

Next morning I went early to the offices of the Criminal Investigation Department at Scotland Yard to await Inspector Munday when he called to report himself. The waiting-room on the first floor to which I was shown was a bare place with a leather-topped table in the centre, and after nearly half-an-hour there entered a short, stout, round-faced man, whose general bearing and manner were utterly unlike the popular idea of a detective.

He held my note of introduction in his hand, and inquired if my name were Jardine.

I replied in the affirmative, whereupon he turned the key in the door behind him as a precaution against intruders, and expressed his readiness to assist me in any way possible.

"Sir Henry Monkhouse has told me that you have the case in hand of the death of a man named White, at Sydenham," I said. "And at the outset I may as well tell you that I am the person who discovered the deceased dead in the roadway."

"Oh!" he exclaimed, looking at me in surprise. "Then you are the gentleman whose connection with the affair was so carefully obliterated. I am very pleased, sir, to have an opportunity of a chat with you, for the mystery is a very remarkable one indeed. You are acquainted, I presume, with the whole facts of the case?"

"With some of them only," I replied, for I wished to hear his story. "You were acquainted with the man, White, were you not?"

"I met him in Vienna, and afterwards here in London," the detective answered. "He was undoubtedly a spy in the service of a foreign Government—Russian, I believe—although he was an Englishman."

"But at the Hotel Victoria they say he was a coloured man."

The detective's round face broadened into a smile.

"He worked the same trick of darkening his face in Pesth," he observed. "He stayed at the Hotel National in the Waitznergasse, as a high-caste Hindoo. I afterwards met him, as an Englishman, at Bauer's, in Vienna. He was an associate of an international gang of crooks."

"Sir Henry mentioned to me that you had discovered the man's association with some woman?" I inquired.

"Yes. A lady called for him once or twice at the 'Victoria.' Her name, it seems, was Stanway."

"And you have found her?" I asked, in breathless eagerness.

"No. She's missing—in hiding most probably. If she were not aware of her friend's death, she would have written or called. But she has done neither. At present my inquiries are directed to the discovery of her whereabouts."

"Perhaps I may be able to assist you," I suggested.

"I think not, sir," was the man's rather curt reply. "I already have quite sufficient assistance. The Commissioner does not approve of our association with amateurs."

Amateurs! He laid emphasis on that final word. What would he have thought if he knew who I was, and what was my profession? Compelled, however, to conceal my calling, it was his rather arrogant, self-confident manner which induced me then and there to make up my mind to prosecute my inquiries alone and independently.

In further conversation I gathered that he knew little more than what I had already learnt from Sir Henry Monkhouse. Undoubtedly, the dead man, White, had been a spy, and his dual existence as a Hindoo and an Englishman must certainly have been known to Clare.

Why, however, had she killed him? What could the motive have been that had led her to take his life? And, again, what could she know regarding the conspiracy of France against England in the Mediterranean?

But I recollected the instructions of the Italian King, and, on leaving Scotland Yard, drove to Grosvenor Square, where on sending in my card I was at once granted audience by His Excellency the Baron Giannini, Italian Ambassador to the Court of St. James', a fact that showed that he had already received orders from his royal master in Rome.

The courtly, dark-bearded, middle-aged man received me affably, and explained how, by a private letter from His Majesty, he had been ordered to render me whatever assistance I required.

"I am, of course, unaware of the nature of the inquiries which His Majesty mentions, and I do not seek to intrude upon what is, I sup-

pose, a private matter. My orders are to give you assistance, Captain Jardine, therefore you may rely upon my aid."

"I returned from Rome only last night," I explained, "and my chief object in calling is to ascertain the names and addresses of the Italian secret agents in London, as I shall in all probability be compelled to have some dealings with them."

The Ambassador was somewhat taken aback by my cool request. An Embassy does not care to acknowledge the employment of spies, for Governments do not countenance them, even though large sums of secret service money are voted annually by every Parliament in Europe.

"To furnish the information you desire is scarcely within my province," His Excellency replied rather evasively.

"But His Majesty has given me leave to obtain the information," I urged. "Surely he has made this plain?"

"Well," he answered hesitatingly, as though not fully trusting me, "he has, it is true."

I was quite unknown to him, and he must certainly have thought it strange, that his King should give me *carte blanche* to obtain the innermost secrets of the Embassy, for if there

is one fact kept concealed more than another, it assuredly is the existence of spies.

"Then I trust your Excellency will act upon His Majesty's command," I said, politely but firmly.

His glance was one of considerable distrust, but he reluctantly rang the bell, and one of his secretaries entered. He asked that a certain book should be brought from the archive-room, and when it came it proved to be a small cloth-bound volume of addresses.

Seated at his table, he searched through it for some minutes, and copied the four names and addresses upon a blank sheet of note-paper, which he afterwards handed to me. They were as follows :—

Lionel Ansell, watchmaker, Beacon Road, Hither Green, S.E.

Edward Matthews, 87, Cromwell Road, Kensington.

Orlando Sarto, engineer, 113, Upper Richmond Road, Barnes.

Henry White, Hotel Victoria, Northumberland Avenue.

White ! Then he was a spy in the service of Italy !

I placed the paper safely in my pocket, content that I held the names of the three

secret agents of Italy who were in our midst. The first man, Ansell, had long been suspected by the police of trying to obtain the secret of the Brenan torpedo, but on behalf of what Government was unknown. The name of White told me the truth, but the other two men were not familiar to me—the one evidently English, and the other Italian.

“Of course you will regard that as strictly confidential, Captain Jardine,” His Excellency remarked, fidgetting uneasily, as though he regretted having to place in my hands the truth by which his trusted agents might be condemned. “I need not tell you that the liberty of those gentlemen whose names are there mentioned is now in your hands. You are an Englishman, and it is but natural that you should resent the espionage of a foreign country in your own capital.”

I smiled, and replied: “All is, I suppose, permissible nowadays. Even England, in order to keep pace with other nations and be as well informed, is now bound to employ secret agents. We may have some in Rome for aught I know.”

“Ah, no,” His Excellency replied, shaking his head, “I never heard of any. You English are far too slow, if you will permit me, as a

foreigner, to express an opinion. The utter hopelessness of your secret service has been lately well illustrated in the Transvaal. Trustworthy reports of spies received before the war would have averted many a disaster to your troops."

I was compelled to agree with him, for it was the general feeling throughout the country, even among those who disfavour the employment of secret agents in the foreign capitals.

"You have written down the name of a man named White, living at the Hotel Victoria," I said. "Is he trustworthy?"

The Ambassador glanced at me quickly, as though trying to read my intentions.

"Well, not very," he responded. "He is in association with some woman, I believe, and the reports made to me are by no means reassuring. He is rather an adventurer who came to us with information for sale."

"But the woman?" I asked. "Who is she?"

"She is said to be young and very attractive—probably a secret agent of one of the other Powers."

"You know her name?" I asked.

He turned again to his address book, and after some search said:—

" Her name is Clare Stanway."

" And her address ?"

" Ah, we have not that, unfortunately. Only the other day I received a special dispatch from Rome in which the Foreign Minister, Vizardelli, particularly desired to know it, but I was unable to supply the required information."

It was evident that the Ambassador was unaware of the man's death; therefore I did not enlighten him.

" Is anyone aware of where this interesting lady lives ? " I demanded anxiously. " The fact is, I am in search of her."

" Then all I can tell you, Captain Jardine," he answered, with a strange, mysterious air that made it plain to me that he knew more than he would tell, " is that you will never find her—*never !* "

CHAPTER XVII

THE SECRET AGENTS

MYSTERY in a woman is always alluring. Many of the gentler sex are clever enough to cultivate an air of mystery, knowing that it is even a greater attraction to men than a soft voice or a fair countenance.

I was dispirited and lonely, solitary even in the hurrying bustle of London's streets. And how lonely a man or woman can be in London! You, my readers, have more than once experienced the outcast feeling among those jostling crowds, and know well that, over-populated as the great city is, it is, at the same time, the most dismal place in the whole world to those with heavy hearts.

My own heart was heavy enough in all conscience. My constant thought was of her, and with the prolonged separation my affection seemed to grow—why, I cannot to this day explain! As you have plainly seen by this straightforward narrative of mine, there was nothing in her favour but a single incident. She was a mystery, a murderess by her own confession, while upon her rested more than suspicion that she was a spy.

And yet when I recalled those joyous evenings at her side, I remembered her majestic sweetness, her grand and precious simplicity, her easy, unforced, yet dignified self-possession, all of which were in her deportment, and in every word she uttered. Her character was one of those of which the world would say proverbially "Still waters run deep." Her passions were not vehement,

but in her settled mind, the sources of pain and pleasure, love or resentment, were like springs that feed the mountain lakes—impenetrable, unfathomable, inexhaustible.

The mixture of playful courtesy, queenly dignity and ladylike sweetness with which she always treated me was charming, and the letter which she had sent to me to Rome showed that she had not forgotten me.

But how could she possibly have known my address or the name by which I chose to call myself? Here again was mystery.

When I thought it all over, the recollection came back to me how more than once, when we had been together, her earnest, eloquent justification of herself and her lofty sense of female honour had been rendered more effective and impressive by that chilling despair, that contempt for a life which had evidently been made bitter to her through unkindness. When she had told me, in a guarded way, of the unmerited insults which had been heaped upon her, it was without asperity or reproach, yet in a tone which showed how completely the iron had entered her soul.

It was only at the suggestion of the Italian King, into whose confidence I had so un-

expectedly been taken, that I was back in London. To me the very idea of obtaining at home a clue to secret negotiations between Paris and Rome seemed utterly out of the question, but I knew that His Majesty was a man of action and that behind his suggestion was either knowledge or strong suspicion.

His fixed idea was that Clare Stanway was in London, therefore he had urged my return.

Without loss of time, I visited the man Ansell. My object was to obtain from him some facts regarding his dead associate, White, and his female acquaintance.

He was, I found, a small working jeweller, living in a quiet suburban road at Hither Green, in the south of London. Certainly he had no outward appearance of a secret agent, for he was an Englishman to the backbone, but, as he informed me, he had lived in Venice in his earlier days and knew the Italian language well.

As I sat in his little back parlour, I produced from my pocket a credential which the Italian Ambassador had given me, and a sight of this he put off all reserve.

"I thought you were a detective," he laughed. "I had no idea that you were in our service. You want to know about White.

Well, although the police believe it to be a case of sudden death, he was murdered, without a doubt—probably by a woman.”

“What woman?”

“A young woman named Stanway. I fancy he was in love with her.”

“Have you ever met her?” I inquired.

“Yes, on several occasions,” he replied. “Once I saw them together at a supper party at the Savoy. The others of the party were strangers to me. At another time I saw them walking together in the Burlington, and, on a third occasion, I encountered them entering the Garrick Theatre.”

“He was her lover then?”

The loosely-built man, who carried on business as a watchmaker, smiled:

“I don’t know,” he said. “It may have been so. Poor White was something of a lady killer.”

“Have you ever spoken to this mysterious lady?”

“Yes, once or twice. She was very charming, and seemed, by her manner, to be a lady.”

“Do you happen to know where she lives?”

“No, but I think I know a man who does.”

Of course, she's most probably disappeared if she really did kill White."

"Well, who is the man who knows? Is he in your service?" And taking out the slip of paper to refresh my memory, I asked, "Is his name Matthews, or is it Sarto?"

He hesitated for a moment, then, apparently recollecting the Ambassador's credential, said, "The latter. Do you know where he lives?"

"At Barnes," I replied, "The Baron has given me his address. I shall go down at once and see him."

It was quite dark before I alighted at Barnes Station, from Waterloo, and I had some difficulty in finding the house of the Italian engineer, Orlando Sarto, who, I afterwards learnt, had an office in Great George Street, Westminster. He had been a naval officer before he had entered the secret service of his country, and was still a young man, smart in appearance and shrewd in grasping any situation.

He was at dinner with his wife, also an Italian, but my card and a verbal message that I had called from the Embassy, brought him at once to see me.

Apologising for disturbing him, I pre-

sented the useful introduction which the Baron had written, and it had the immediate effect I desired.

"You may speak quite confidentially," I said, when I had ascertained that the door was latched. "You are in the service of the Italian Government just as I am. The reason of my visit is to ascertain some facts regarding a certain lady named Stanway—Clare Stanway—with whom you are, I believe, acquainted."

He opened his dark eyes widely.

"Who told you about her?" he asked quickly, in evident surprise.

"Well, I happen to be acquainted with her myself."

"What—you knew her?" he cried. "Then you knew her friend, White, the man who was found dead at Sydenham?"

"He was scarcely her friend, was he?" I suggested. "There are suspicions against her, are there not?"

"Suspicions, yes! But all unfounded. She never killed him—that I'm sure."

I wondered why he was so positive.

"Do you know where she is at present?"

"No," was his reply: "She's disappeared."

"A fact which rather increases the suspicion held by some," I remarked.

"By whom?"

"By Ansell, for instance."

"You know Ansell?" he inquired, his brows contracting as though puzzled.

"Of course. Have I not told you that I am in your country's service. Only a couple of days ago I arrived from Rome. But where did the interesting young lady live before her disappearance? I knew her, but she never told me her London address."

"Then you knew her abroad, I suppose?"

I nodded in the affirmative.

"While in London, she stayed in Warwick Gardens, Kensington—number one hundred and twenty-two."

My heart leaped within me. At last I had some clue that I might follow.

I sought to obtain some further information from him, but all the additional facts I gathered were that she had always been regarded as a mystery and that Clare Stanway was, as I also felt confident, an assumed name.

"She was somehow connected with certain 'high personages,'" the Italian added.

"Who they were, however, we never discovered."

"But White and she were friends, were they not?"

"She assumed a friendship towards him," was the reply, "but I believe there was no affection between them. In fact the reason of her being so constantly in his company was, in itself, rather a mystery."

"She was not in your secret service?"

"Oh, dear no," he laughed. "That is why I warned White of her, on several occasions. I feared that she was in the service of the English police and intended to betray him, as a spy."

"What do you know of her life at Warwick Gardens?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I've never been to the house. It would be interesting to visit it."

"I shall do so to-morrow morning, and if you can accompany me, I shall be most pleased."

"I'll be delighted," he replied eagerly. Therefore we made an appointment to meet at ten o'clock next morning, at the corner of Kensington Road and Warwick Gardens, and after that I took my leave.

That night I slept but little, feeling that I was at last on the point of making a discovery and of keeping faith with my royal patron. I was working in the interests of England, just as much as in those of Italy. Besides, I had gained knowledge of three secret agents in London who had been hitherto unsuspected. The man Ansell had friends in the Woolwich Arsenal, while Sarto was the intimate chum of a certain man who held a responsible position in the firm of Vickers, Sons and Maxim, who were constructing submarines for the British Government and making trials at Barrow-in-Furness. From him he no doubt obtained a good deal of information. Sarto was also on good terms with certain Admiralty officials who must here be nameless, but who, I may add, for the satisfaction of the reader, were all transferred to other posts by reason of a secret report afterwards made by me.

I have never betrayed to Scotland Yard the real names of the three men who are known here as Ansell, Matthews and Sarto, but those who had furnished them with information were fully reported upon, and more than one was dismissed from office and branded as a traitor to his King and country.

There are, alas ! men who can be bought, even in our Government offices. I daresay this statement will be challenged, but in the archives of the Home Office are preserved all-sufficient proofs. And regrettable as this may be, it is, after all, the lax system which allows young, irresponsible and underpaid clerks to learn what, in other countries, are regarded as the most profound secrets, that is, in a great measure, responsible for the success of this horde of foreign spies ever in our midst.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MAN-IN-THE-STREET

THE morning broke damp and dismal—one of those chilling days in early spring when there hangs, even over Kensington, usually the clearest and cleanest of London's environs, a pall of fog, and the streets are a quagmire of liquid mud. As I stood at the corner of Warwick Gardens, that thoroughfare which opens in a kind of crescent from the high road and narrows down to an ordinary street, the outlook was very dispiriting. The hour of the appointment came, and passed, but the Italian did not put in an appearance.

This surprised me considerably, for I had left him, feeling that he intended to render me assistance.

Until eleven o'clock I waited about in the vicinity, then, annoyed and disappointed, I gave the Italian up and, leaving the spot where we had arranged to meet, went up the long street in search of the house he had indicated as the residence of my mysterious love.

I was not long in discovering number one hundred and twenty-two, an ordinary two-storied house with basement, standing nearly opposite the Presbyterian Church. Its exterior was rather smarter than those of its neighbours, for it had been recently painted drab, and the railings were of the most approved shade of London green. The Venetian blinds were, however, down, and the flight of steps leading to the front door had not been hearthstoned for weeks—plain evidence that the house was closed.

Twice I sauntered past it, but discovered no sign that it was inhabited. Other houses in the vicinity had cards up announcing "Apartments to Let," and it struck me that the closed house was of the same character, and that its outward smartness was, as is

so often the case, a kind of advertisement to attract the eye of the searcher after "rooms."

Almost opposite I noticed a shabby-genteel man in a brown overcoat slowly sweeping a crossing. There are lots of such in Kensington, for in the morning they obtain coppers from City men glad to evade the mud on their way to the High Street Station, and pick up quite a fair living by calling cabs and going on errands for the neighbouring houses. They are generally local directories, as most of them have cadged for years in the same street.

So I crossed to the man in question, and, as an introduction, asked if he knew any one living about there by the name of Francis.

"No, sir. I'm sorry I don't, sir," he responded, leaning on his broom.

"I think they only lived here for a few months. They may have left now." I used a fictitious name and made this latter remark in order that the old fellow should gossip.

"No, sir," he replied, placing his hand at the back of his head, "I don't rec'lect anybody of that name. Of course we gets

lots o' lodgers in the Gardens, and I don't know their names."

"You see some funny things about here, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. Me and the constable on the beat often laughs. We see a lot 'ere, we do. You see this part is fashionable for lodgers. Warwick Gardens is a good address, they say."

"And they have to pay dearly for it—eh?"

The old fellow shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"So you can give me no information?" I remarked.

"Sorry I can't, sir. Are you sure they lived in the Gardens? There's Warwick Road close by. Lots o' people make mistakes."

"No. It was Warwick Gardens," I said. "But perhaps they've left. That house opposite, for instance, is it unoccupied?"

"Nobody lives in it," was his reply. "It's furnished, but shut up. There's a bit o' mystery about it."

"Oh," I laughed, "what is it?"

"Well, it used to belong to Mrs. Bond, who let apartments, like the people next door. One day, about four months ago,

there called a gentleman and a lady saying they wanted rooms. They looked all over the 'ouse, expressed their satisfaction, and the gentleman, without any more ado, goes and offers her a good round sum for the whole of her furniture and the remainder of her lease! At first the old lady thought the chap was a lunatic, but when he produced the money in fifty-pound notes from his pocket she saw he meant business, so after a bit of bargaining she accepted, gave a receipt, packed up her personal belongings, and, together with her two servants, cleared that same evening."

"A pretty smart piece of business," I remarked. "And who were the eccentric pair?"

"The man's name was Captain Lock, a naval officer, I believe—dark, with a black beard. The lady was quite young—his daughter. She was a very pretty young lady, and always very generous when she sent me with a telegram or anything."

"And they had their own servants and lived here?"

"They had two servants, a man and a woman, but they only lived here about a fortnight. One morning, when I came at

seven o'clock, as usual, I noticed that the kitchen blinds were not up, and thought the servants had overslept the'selves. But when they were not pulled up all day, I saw that the people had packed up and gone. I told the policeman, and he examined the doors and windows. They're all fast enough. There was something funny about the Captain, I fancy. The postman says he never brought them any letters, and they paid the tradespeople in High Street ready cash for everything—even to the milkman."

"Well," I remarked, "they didn't enjoy the houseful of furniture very long."

"No," laughed the old fellow. "But Mrs. Bond made a pretty good bargain. She got seven 'underd pound, paid on the nail. Chance lodgers don't often treat a landlady so 'andsome."

"But has nothing been heard of the Captain or the young lady?"

"Nothing, from that day till this—over six weeks now. They paid three years' rent to the landlord, and got a receipt, the day after they bought out Mrs. Bond. Funny, ain't it?" And we both regarded the house with the Venetian blinds with curiosity.

I got from him a description of the young lady, and found it to tally entirely with that of my missing love. She was undoubtedly Captain Lock's companion—daughter, he believed.

He could not recall the exact date when the house was closed, but as far as I could gather it was either on the day of the tragedy out at Sydenham, or a day or so earlier.

Houses in the West End of London are, of course, often closed and left while their owners are out of town. Sometimes a caretaker is placed in possession, more often than not a married policeman, who keeps the front blinds down as a sign to callers, and who lives at the rear. Again, six weeks is not a long absence, and would not have attracted the old man's attention in the least were it not for the fact that the Captain had bought out Mrs. Bond, one of the oldest and most rapacious of lodging-house keepers in what he termed "the Gardens."

Why the man Sarto had not kept the appointment puzzled me. Perhaps, however, he had not been altogether satisfied as to my bona-fides and intended to first consult the Embassy before having further relations with me. If he were a cautious man, as no doubt

he was, this was the course he would undoubtedly adopt.

From the first, however, I made up my mind to effect an entry into the deserted premises and to examine them in the hope of discovering something which might place me on the track of the fugitive. And as I stood chatting with the old man I debated whether I should take him into my confidence and bribe him to assist me in my search, or whether it was policy to conduct my investigations alone and unaided.

I decided at last that the latter was the best course. The old fellow was a chatterer. He might tell his bosom friend, the policeman on the beat, and I might find myself arrested for house-breaking, a circumstance that would entail long and undesirable explanations. So I resolved to wait until nightfall and conduct my operations alone. My friend went home at four o'clock, he informed me, and returned at half-past seven in the morning; therefore, between those hours the house in question was not under his surveillance. His stand was almost exactly opposite, so through the day he mounted guard, as it were.

I placed a shilling in his palm, regretting

that he could tell me nothing about the family of Francis, and walked back to the Kensington Road gratified at having learned those few very interesting but puzzling facts.

On my way home to Great Russell Street I made several purchases, which included one of those electric torches—long tin cylinders with an electric bull's-eye lamp in the end. This I chose because it can be instantly flashed off and on. At a tool shop in Theobald's Road, where no questions are asked the buyer although high prices are demanded for certain mechanical contrivances, I obtained a certain steel instrument, the use of which would puzzle the uninitiated, but which would quickly be recognized if produced in any police station. It was what the burgling fraternity know as a "panel-cutter."

At home I looked out a garment which had often been of use to me, and which I termed my "reversible." It was an overcoat which might be worn inside out, one side being of a smart light fawn and the other a shabby black. The use of such a garment to one whose profession was that of a watcher, like myself, is obvious. Many times it had been of greatest benefit to me abroad, for

on finding myself observed I had only to retire to some quiet corner in the neighbourhood, turn my coat, exchange my hat for a cap, and return to my post another man to all appearances. The very policeman would not know me again.

My friend Kirkwood having heard from me of my return from Rome, called about five, when he left his office, and sat with me an hour chatting and smoking. He was always interested in any of my exploits and was anxious to learn the reason I had been ordered to Italy. My rule, however, was to say nothing until my inquiries were complete. So I fear he learned but little. Nevertheless I was half inclined to take him into my confidence on this occasion and invoke his assistance. Yet I recollected how unmercifully he had chaffed me regarding my association with my mysterious enchantress, and I hesitated to reveal to him how utterly foolish I had been regarding her.

"Oh! by the way, Jack," he exclaimed at length, as he puffed vigorously at the cigar I had handed him, "what about that little love affair of yours? Pardon me, but you never mention the fair one now."

"There's no need to mention her, I suppose,"

I snapped, for I had expected he would return to the unwelcome subject. "She has left London."

"Carrying your heart with her, old chap—eh?"

"I don't know so much about that," I responded rather resentfully.

"You used to be so full of her grace and beauty a little while ago, you know, that I really thought it was growing serious."

"Did I? Well, I suppose any of us may admire a woman now and then," I laughed, with assumed indifference.

"She was a bit of a mystery, wasn't she? Did you ever get at the bottom of it? Remember, you told me all about your first romantic meeting, and how she firmly refused to give you any inkling of who she was."

"Yes," I answered, not without some hesitation, "she was a mystery."

"And is still, Jardine, old fellow. I can tell it from your manner."

"You are correct. She is still a mystery."

"And you meet her sometimes, I suppose?"

"No."

"All off—eh?" he exclaimed, jumping to a conclusion, "And if you'll permit me as

an old friend to say so, it's a jolly good job. That girl got on your nerves, old chap."

I took a long pull at my glass in order to gain time for a response.

"I don't think she did," I remarked quietly. "She was simply a girl whom you couldn't fathom. There are lots about London like her."

"Oh, lots. I've known shop-girls who pretended to be ladies out for an evening's amusement. The fact, however, that they have to be in by ten o'clock always gives them away." And he laughed merrily—at the recollection of past adventures, I supposed.

"No," I differed. "Shop assistants, as a class, are not given to posing. They work hard, and take their evenings merrily. I met a girl up the river one Sunday who hinted that she was a French countess. She even gave the name, and told me she lived at Mentone—she called it Men-toney. I afterwards discovered that she was a typewriter at an office in Eastcheap."

"Your own mystery-girl may be just as great a fraud," he laughed. "I told you at the time to be careful, old chap. You're such a foreigner—living so much abroad

as you do—that you're not up to the wiles of the London girl, as I am."

"I willingly hand you the palm of being a ladies' man, George," I answered, smiling. "You can reckon your best girls by the dozen. I'm an unlucky devil where women are concerned—always was."

"Ah!" he remarked, "I don't believe in mysterious goddesses. If they want to conceal who they are, I always fight shy. There's something behind it, you can bet."

And he went on in this strain until at seven he rose to go home to dress, for he was dining with a man at the "Trocadero" and going to the play afterwards.

I had a quiet meal alone, a pleasant, pensive smoke, a doze in my comfortable chair, and about eleven, instead of going to bed, I pulled myself together, assumed my reversible overcoat, placed an extra cap in my pocket, together with the electric torch and the panel-cutter, which, taken to pieces, occupied but little room, and sallied forth on my midnight exploit.

A hansom took me as far as the High Street Station at Kensington, and thence I walked on until I reached the house, passing it twice and noting that the neighbours on

either side had retired to bed, and that no policeman was lurking near.

The night was dark and a trifle misty, just the weather for such an attempt. At that hour, nearly midnight, Warwick Gardens were deserted, and the only sound was the whistling of distant trains at Addison Road and the tinkle of an occasional cab-bell.

At last, as I moved quietly past the house, I suddenly halted, clambered over the locked gate, and descended into the area almost without a sound. My disappearance from the street had been so instantaneous that if any one had been watching they would in that moment have been puzzled to know into which basement I had plunged.

As soon as I came to the area door, I commenced operations without delay, for I knew not from one moment to the other when a constable might not flash his bull's-eye down upon the door, knowing that the place, being unoccupied, was a temptation to burglars.

In the pitch darkness I managed to fit my strange steel implement together, then flashing on my torch I lost no time in attacking the door by the silent system. Instead of forcing it and creating a noise, I had decided to cut out the panel. The centre of my

instrument was a strong stem with a gimlet point, which I placed in the centre of the panel near the lock. Through the stem there was a sliding cross-bar, carrying at one extremity a very sharp cutting tool, which could be adjusted to cut a circle of any radius. At the head of the stem was fixed a double-armed lever which worked the whole machine.

The door proved thick and of hard wood, but by turning the lever rapidly with a strong arm for a few minutes I managed to cut out a circle, a foot across, cleanly and with hardly a sound.

The work was exciting, especially when, by placing my arm through the door, I managed to unlock it on the inside, and undo the chain. Fortunately the door was not bolted.

Then, a moment later, I stepped into the house. Assuredly the place proved to be a house of mystery—for the mystery hidden there was even greater than I had ever suspected.

It was astounding—bewildering.

CHAPTER XIX

EXPLAINS THE MYSTERY OF THE CLOSED HOUSE

THE adventure was full of excitement, for I knew not what that closed house contained.

With bated breath I crept on tiptoe along the kitchen passage, the light of my torch revealing that the place was neglected and uncleanly, and after making a cursory investigation of the lower premises, ascended the stairs to the front hall. Even though I trod lightly, my footsteps echoed weirdly through the deserted place, and I was compelled to extinguish my lamp and grope in darkness, for fear lest the light should be noticed outside through the fanlight over the front door.

The atmosphere of the place was close and musty, that peculiar odour that seems inseparable from the London lodging-house, while the stair-carpet and linoleum were so dirty that the pattern on them had long ago been effaced. I stumbled on something in the hall, and found it to be an old Gladstone

bag ready packed, and evidently forgotten in the hurry of departure.

The first of the living apartments I entered was the front parlour, a fair-sized room, with a smoke-blackened chandelier, cheap and rickety dining-room furniture and a square table. But the place presented no noteworthy feature. It was just the same as a thousand other parlours let to lodgers, with the cheap sideboard containing the cruet—for the use of which so much is charged weekly—and the inevitable coal-scuttle of small capacity, which is such a fruitful source of revenue to the landlady.

The adjoining room, separated by folding doors, was, as I expected, a bedroom. All was in order, and there were no signs that it had been occupied immediately before the occupants had left. After an investigation of a small room at the end of the passage, I ascended the stairs and entered the drawing-room.

Here an entirely different spectacle was presented. The place was just as cheaply furnished as the room downstairs, save that the fireplace was half-hidden by sooty serge, by courtesy, I suppose, called "drapery"; the chairs and couch were covered with dark

red rep, black with grease in places, and the carpet so worn that no pattern could be distinguished; the lace curtains were yellow with fog and dirt, and, from the disorder of the place, with newspapers and articles of men's wearing apparel strewn about it, it appeared as though some one had packed hurriedly in that room before leaving.

I examined a man's dress-coat lying on the floor, and found that it was of good quality though well-worn. I tried it on, and found that its owner was slightly smaller than myself, though with unusually long arms. There was, however, nothing in its pockets save a square piece of red cardboard bearing a number. At first this puzzled me, but presently I recognized that it was the coupon for a "consommation" or refreshment, at the *Café des Ambassadeurs* in Paris. The owner of the coat had no doubt received it when on a visit there during the past summer. The remainder of the suit of clothes were flung discarded upon a chair, a fact which showed that their owner had taken to flight, and was compelled to travel with as light luggage as possible.

Upon the couch lay a woman's evening bodice. It was of cream chiffon with

trimming of turquoise blue velvet, but it lay crumpled and dirty; while on the side table half a dozen clean ladies' handkerchiefs of fine quality had apparently been forgotten. I examined each one, but found no mark whatsoever, neither name nor initials.

Could they and the bodice have been the property of my missing love, I wondered, as I stood gazing around the disordered room.

Not a single article did I leave uninvestigated, for I was seeking to discover some clue to the destination of the mysterious fugitives—for fugitives they evidently were, from the hasty manner in which they had packed, and the things they had overlooked in their headlong hurry.

Even the kitchen showed that their departure had been quite unexpected, for the servants had left pots on the fire containing eatables, and there were dirty plates and pans everywhere, as though a meal had only just been cleared away.

Suddenly an object on the mantelshelf caught my eye, and I went across to examine it. It was a circular leather jewel-case, and on opening it I found within a bracelet made of tiny nuggets of gold, each one joined to the other by a fine chain.

In an instant and with an involuntary cry, I recognized it as an ornament which Clare had worn one evening when I met her at Sydenham, and which she had taken off and handed to me when I had admired it. An uncle who had been in Klondike brought home the nuggets and had them made into the bracelet, a really unique and curious ornament.

As I held it again in my hand, turning it over and over, I felt bewildered.

This at least, however, showed that my love had actually lived here, and that at last I was on the track of her.

I recollected the King's words to me. How was it possible, I wondered, that she could be aware of the great secret upon which hung the future peace of Europe?

I replaced the bracelet in its case, and put it into my pocket as a souvenir of my lost love—that strangely beautiful woman who, upon her own confession, was a murderess.

Why did I love her, you ask me again? Why, I ask, in return, does any man love a woman? The Tuscans say, *Chi soffre per amor, non sente pene*. (Who suffers for love feels no pain.)

In that smoke-grimed drawing-room the

dust was over everything, and its topsyturvydom seemed to increase the mystery of the hasty flight of Captain Lock and his daughter. Was it possible that after the tragedy at Sydenham she returned there, travelling by way of Clapham Junction to Addison Road Station, packed up her belongings and departed? To me, that seemed to be the most feasible explanation.

A newspaper was lying on the floor. The date was the eighth of February, the very day of the tragedy!

There were no folding doors between the drawing-room and the room at the rear, therefore I went out upon the landing again and turned the handle of the back room.

To my surprise it was locked. I turned my electric bull's-eye full upon it, and saw that the key had been taken away. For the moment I was baffled, for I feared to make a noise by bursting it open, for the walls of those houses are so thin that one can almost follow the conversation of one's next-door neighbour. No doubt the people on either side had had their curiosity aroused by the sudden closing of the house, and were on the alert for the return of the new owners,

or the entry of strangers. Hence, if I created a noise, my discovery there would be inevitable.

So I resolved to use my burglar's tool again, and went down to procure it.

While below in the kitchen passage I suddenly heard a sound which caused me to halt, and switch off my light instantly. Fortunate for me that I did so, for next second a ray of light flashed across the kitchen and disappeared, accompanied by the heavy regular tread of the constable as he went his lonely round. It was a good thing too that he was approaching from the Brompton Road end of the street, otherwise his light would probably have flashed upon the door with the big circular hole in it.

I held my breath and listened to the footsteps as they died away; then with the panel-cutter crept back again upstairs in the pitch darkness.

The door of the room was by no means so thick as that of the area; hence after adjusting my instrument near the lock, I very soon cut out a good-sized piece of the panel. Then, detaching the cross-handle which was formed to be used as a jemmy if required, I put my hand inside, and with the aid of the bar at

last succeeded in forcing off the cheap iron socket into which the lock was shot.

Next moment I was inside the room, and what I saw there was perhaps the most amazing and startling spectacle that ever my eyes had gazed upon.

As the light flashed across the place I saw that it was a dining-room, and that the square table was laid for four persons in a rather elaborate manner. In the centre was a big glass epergne filled with flowers, now, however, brown, withered and dead, while at one end were the remains of a large cake, from which the mice scampered on my entry, scuttling away to their holes.

There was wine in decanters upon the table, and fruit, now rotten and decayed. Three of the four plates had the peelings of fruit upon them, and two of the champagne glasses had been used. Three of those persons who had sat at the table were now absent; the fourth, the man who had sat at the head, was present—the most ugly and frightful of all objects in the world, a decomposing corpse!

The arm-chair in which he was seated had prevented him from rolling to the floor, but he had fallen forward upon the table

over which he had presided, his withered hands spread upon the dirty table-cloth, his head resting upon his arm.

After the first shock of the discovery I stood stock still, and open-mouthed. So unexpected and so horrible was it, that I was for the moment rooted to the spot.

The dead president of the feast was a man of about forty, as nearly as I could judge from the darkness of his hair and the thickness of his beard. His face, with its dropped jaw, however, was a mere blur of unrecognizable features, so hideous that sight of it caused me to shudder. He was in evening dress, but his shirt-front, with its diamond stud, bore a great brown stain, and the glass swept from the table by his arms lay upon the carpet shattered. In his coat was a bunch of lilies, now withered and brown, while the pot plants in the window had drooped and died. The candles had burned into their sockets, all save one, standing upon the sideboard, and this I lit in order to obtain more light.

It revealed to me the true ghastliness of the scene. Of the three other places, only two had apparently been occupied, for the plate of the third was clean and the chair

in its place, as though a guest had been expected but had not arrived. The occupants of the other two chairs had no doubt got up hurriedly and left the table, for the fruit was half-eaten, wine was still in the glasses, and a serviette lay on the floor. How, I wondered, had that tragic feast ended?

To me it seemed as though the host had suddenly fallen forward and expired, whereupon his two companions, whoever they were, had risen, gone out, locked the door and made their escape swiftly.

The room was furnished in far better style than the others. There was a handsome old black-line Sheraton sideboard, upon which stood some fruit and bottles, and the chairs were solid leather-covered ones, such as I should not have expected to find in a lodging-house. The carpet, too, was a Turkey one, almost new; but over everything was the dirt and dust of London until the damask table-cloth was nearly yellow.

This unexpected and startling discovery caused me to hesitate. I think I must have been unnerved, for the scuttling of a mouse caused my heart to leap, and my hand holding the lamp trembled. I would willingly have fled from the house of mystery without

further investigation, only duty held me there. I had at last, after those weeks of futile effort, discovered a clue, and was bound to follow it.

I walked around the back of the dead man's chair, and with my torch examined his dusty back in order to discover whether he bore any wound. I found none, neither was there any sign of blood on table-cloth or carpet.

Was it possible that he had been smitten down suddenly by a stroke and expired, or had he fallen the victim of a plot?

The hurried exit of his companions, the locking of the door, and their disappearance, pointed to the latter conclusion.

I noticed that his fingers had, in the last paroxysm of agony, clenched themselves deeply into the palms, and this caused me to suspect death by poisoning.

The searching of the clothes of a dead man is always a repugnant task, but my curiosity was aroused to know who and what the unfortunate man was; therefore I brought the candle near, and with trembling fingers searched in the breast pocket of his dress-coat. To my disappointment it contained only a clean silk handkerchief. The trouser

pockets contained a bunch of keys, some loose silver, and a penknife. I could find no card case; nothing to establish his identity. I remembered that the old crossing-sweeper had described the mysterious Captain Lock as dark, with a black beard, a description which tallied with that of the dead man. Suddenly I bethought myself of his watch, and after an effort, for I avoided moving the body lest it should overbalance to the ground, I succeeded in detaching the watch from the albert. It was a fine gold chronometer, and had stopped at twenty minutes past three. I opened it, and there, inside the case, I found the owner's name engraved thus—

“ PAUL ROSSIFER.

“ 14 . 6 . 97.”

CHAPTER XX

A CROOKED CONCERN

THE name Paul Rossifer told me nothing, after all. The watch might have belonged to some man of that name before passing into the possession of the Captain Lock whose

movements had been so mysterious. It is not everyone who buys a houseful of furniture and lives in it only for a fortnight.

The old crossing-sweeper who was so full of the private affairs of "the Gardens" had most distinctly told me that the Captain was dark and possessed a full beard. The dead man answered to that description exactly, although his features had fallen away out of all recognition.

The atmosphere of the place was awful, therefore I was glad enough to escape from it and close the door after me.

What further surprise awaited me in that closed house I knew not. That a tragedy had been enacted there was quite clear, but what had led to it I failed to conjecture.

The one thought which possessed me, however, was the suspicion that the woman whom I had so fondly loved had actually been seated at the table when the secret blow had been struck—that she was an accessory to the crime!

To me it seemed entirely clear that the unfortunate man had been poisoned. He had been served with doctored wine by one or other of the pair, and the poison had been so potent in its effect that on swallowing

it the glass had fallen from his hand, and the sudden paralysis that followed had prevented him even from rising from his chair.

And Clare Stanway must be aware of it—was privy to the plot perhaps—for she was one of the fugitives !

All this, too, had occurred on the night either before or after the mysterious assassination of the man, White—perhaps even on the very same night !

Perhaps the meal had been supper on that very night after Clare's return from Sydenham !

Thoughts such as these held me petrified. Mechanically I ascended the stairs to the next floor, where I found four bedrooms, one of them having been undoubtedly occupied by my love, for behind the door hung, dusty and neglected, a dark grey dress-skirt, which by its trimming I recognized as one she had worn on several occasions when we met. It was of superior cut, and on taking it down to search the pocket, I saw by the band that it had been made by Redfern of Paris.

The pocket, however, disappointed me, for it contained nothing.

The room was a comfortable one, looking out upon the church opposite, but it was

all in disorder, giving every evidence that its occupant had packed up quickly. One big trunk, half filled with wearing apparel, stood open, and had evidently been too large to remove from the house without attracting attention. I took the things out, one by one, in order to find a mark; initials or name upon them, but I found nothing—absolutely nothing. The linen was of finest quality, and the several evening gowns I drew forth were magnificent, fit for any queen. My lost love evidently dressed well, and with exquisite taste.

Presently, during my search here and there in every corner of the room, drawers, cupboards and boxes, my eyes suddenly fell upon the grate, and poking in it I discovered a quantity of blackened tinder, showing that some papers had been destroyed before her departure.

She had evidently burnt every scrap of writing which might lead to the discovery of her hiding-place, another fact that increased the suspicions I now entertained.

The man, White, was evidently an adventurer, and most certainly a spy. This Captain Lock was, in all probability, a gentleman of the same profession. Yes, my love

had, in any case, kept very queer company. Her ingenuity had been little short of marvellous. I had believed myself to be gifted with some cleverness in crooked concerns, but she had beaten me entirely on my own ground.

And yet I loved that woman—yes, I adored her!

Neither nook nor corner did I leave uninvestigated in the room she had occupied, yet all my search was utterly in vain. She had been far too clever to leave behind anything incriminating.

In the other rooms and in the servants' quarters I met with no better luck. Save that I had discovered the secret why the house was closed, I was compelled to admit that I was no nearer the truth.

Back to Clare's room I retraced my steps, holding the electric lamp in my hand, and glancing round to make sure that I had overlooked no corner. The place was in a sad state of upset. On first entering there I had found it strewn with feminine belongings, and to this disorder I had added by turning out the contents of the travelling trunk.

As I stood in the doorway the trunk in question was straight opposite me, and for

the first time I saw that attached to its handle was one of those leather cases into which a card is slipped, and the address written.

There was an address upon it, and in eagerness I went forward and looked.

The previous address had been scratched out hurriedly, and in its place was written in a hand which I at once recognized as Clare's :—

“ Stanway, Hotel Métropole, Milan.”

I unbuckled the small strap and stood with it in my hand. Was it possible that she had altered the address when packing her trunk, so as to be all ready for flight. Or was it an old address? Such was the question I had at that moment to decide.

If the address were the one to which she intended travelling, then in Milan I might find some trace of her. If, on the other hand, it was an old address, my journey back to Italy would be futile.

I examined it well in the strong rays of electricity. The card was not fresh, for it had been used on a previous journey. Indeed, the trunk, with its many hotel labels, showed that its owner had wandered about extensively through Europe.

The enigma had become more puzzling

than ever, and the affair more tragic. In the whole house, after a search of nearly three hours, that was the only address I had found—a vague one, most certainly. But I knew Milan well; I knew the hotel, having stayed there. It was, I recollected, in the Piazza del Duomo, opposite the world-famed Cathedral. Germans and Americans were its chief patrons.

Should I risk the loss of five days of valuable time and go there? If I left Charing Cross at nine in the morning I could get to Milan by way of Basle and Chiasso, and be back in London within five days!

The fact that she had been, or was, in Italy rather seemed to confirm the King's allegation that from her I could ascertain the secret of the proposed political alliance. Besides, that she was certainly mixed up with an unscrupulous gang of foreign spies, I had already proved.

I tossed a penny into the air there and then in order to decide whether I should undertake the long and tedious journey. It came down heads, therefore with the address label in my pocket, I crept quietly downstairs, and out of that house of the dead; but previous to leaving I managed

to replace the circle of wood that I had cut from the area door, in order that the attention of the police, or of that of the watchful crossing-sweeper, should not be attracted by it. Then watching my opportunity I let myself out by the front door, ran down the steps, and stole silently along towards the Kensington Road, with the noisy white city of Milan in Italy for my next destination.

I did not arrive back at Great Russell Street till past half-past three, and on entering was surprised to find a smart-looking, rather tall Italian who struck me as being an officer, sitting in my room awaiting me.

He rose as I entered, and said in his own tongue :

“ I believe you are Signor Jardine, and that you speak Italian ? ”

“ I do,” I answered in surprise at finding a visitor at that hour.

“ I am a special messenger of His Majesty the King,” he explained, without further ado, “ and I am charged to deliver this into your hands. I arrived from Rome to-night, and was detained at the Embassy. When I came here I found you were out, so I have waited because His Majesty’s message is urgent and important,” and he handed me

a letter sealed with five black seals bearing the royal cipher and crown of Italy.

My fingers trembled with excitement as I opened it, and then I read as follows, written in perfect English :—

“DEAR CAPTAIN JARDINE,—

As promised, I send you immediate word of the result of inquiries made by my command. The lady of whom you are in search will be found at Warwick Gardens, Kensington, London, but I am not aware of the number of the house. If you should meet with a man who calls himself Captain Lock, or Locker, beware of him. The position of affairs remains unchanged. Please report to me any fresh facts you have discovered. —V. E.”

I smiled, and I think the messenger must have been surprised at the manner in which I received his royal master's message.

“I have a reply to send to His Majesty, if you will kindly wait while I write,” I said, pouring him out a brandy and soda, for I knew well the Italian's aversion to the wine of Scotland.

Then I went to my table, and in a brief

note told the King of all my movements, of the flight of Clare, and of the gruesome discovery I had that night made. I added that I was starting for Milan by the next train.

Having sealed the letter I gave it into the messenger's hands, incidentally mentioning that I should be crossing the Channel next morning, and would travel with him as far as Calais. There our ways would diverge: his to Paris, Modane and Turin to Rome; mine to Rheims, Belfort, Basle, Lucerne and the Saint Gothard into Lombardy.

He apparently knew his London well, for when I let him out he did not even inquire the way to Morley's Hotel, where he was staying.

It was evident from the King's letter that his secret service were making every possible inquiry. The man Sarto had told me the address, yet it was strange that he had failed to keep the appointment. Was it because he knew the secret reason why the house was closed?

I snatched a couple of hours' sleep, scribbled a letter to George Kirkwood, and flinging a few things into the fitted bag I used for flying journeys, left Charing Cross by the nine o'clock service. The King's

messenger was my companion as far as Calais, where we parted.

Then I entered the wagon-lit for Basle and gave myself up to hours of inactivity both of body and of mind.

In due course I arrived at Milan, that most noisy, most ugly, and most un-Italian city in Italy. It was mid-day, with a cloudless sky, and bright warm sunshine, different indeed to the grey chilly weather on the Thames.

The open cab deposited me before the hotel, which, as those who read these lines and have visited Milan know well, is on the corner of the Piazza, just away from that eternal procession of electric trams. The big German concierge with the fair beard came forth to greet me, and carried my simple bag within. Having been shown to my room, I washed hurriedly and returned to the hall in order to make friends with the porter, an affable fellow, who as soon as I slipped a ten-lire note into his hand, became talkative.

I was perfectly frank with him, and told him that I had arrived there with the object of finding a certain English lady named Stanway, who probably arrived at the hotel

about a month ago. I described her as accurately as I could, whereupon the big German looked grave and thoughtful.

"Ach! sir, I am afraid I do not recollect," he replied in English with a strong German accent—for half the people in Milan appear to be thrifty persons from the Fatherland. "I will, however, look up the register, and see if any note I made, or any address she left, will recall the lady to my memory."

He went into his small office and consulted the book in which the visitors had registered their names. Watching over his shoulder, I saw him turn over page after page of signatures, written about the date I had given him, until at length the bold autograph of which I was in search caught my eye. "Clare Stanway" was written there, with Paris as the city whence she had arrived. According to the entry she had remained at the hotel three days only.

"Did she leave any address to which letters might be forwarded?" I inquired eagerly.

"Yes, apparently she did," replied the German concierge. "Here it is—'Miss Clare Stanway, care of Her Highness the Princess Ozeroff, Ozeroff Palace, St. Petersburg.'"

"St. Petersburg!" I cried. "Then she travelled straight from here to Russia?"

"I suppose so, Signore," was the man's reply. "I recollect now that she was very anxious about a telegram which did not arrive. It came after she left, and I re-addressed it to her."

"Was she alone?"

"No, Signore. A gentleman was with her."

"What kind of man; describe him."

"A tall dark man—a Russian, I think. See. His name is here, 'Nicholas Gribski.'"

Gribski! That name sounded somehow familiar to me. Yes, I was certain of the connection in which I had heard it. The discovery was an unexpected one, and threw an entirely fresh light upon the situation.

I resolved at once to follow up this fresh clue, and at eleven o'clock that night I set out from Milan on the long and tedious journey due north across Europe to the Russian capital.

CHAPTER XXI

ON DANGEROUS GROUND

IN one particular I was fortunate, for I caught the express which runs, in winter, twice a week between Cannes and Petersburg; and it being a through train de luxe, with restaurant, the weariness of the long journey was greatly diminished. So, travelling by way of Pontafel, Vienna, Granica, and Warsaw, I alighted on the third morning at the big bare station on the Novobvodny at Petersburg.

It was not the first time by a good many that I had set foot there. Indeed, for nearly two years I had occupied the post of attaché at our Embassy, and therefore knew the gay Russian capital quite well. I knew, too, the Ozeroff Palace, that magnificent mansion facing the Great Neva, close to the Alexander Bridge, a palace in every sense of the word. I knew nothing of the Princess, however, for the place had been closed during my term at the Embassy. Her Highness the

Princess was, I had once heard, cousin of the Czar.

I put up at the "Europe," at the corner of the Nevski and the Michael Street. If you have been in Petersburg you know the place, with the row of stone vases all along the top. And now let me confess that in Russia I was upon very dangerous ground. My passport bore the name of Vesey, was properly viséd by the Russian Consulate-General in London, and entirely in order, but it was not so very long ago that I had been in Petersburg on a secret mission given me by Lord Glinton, and had, by sheer good fortune, been able to successfully accomplish it. At the very last moment, however, an agent of the Secret Police had discovered who and what I was, and only by an ingenious wile had I been able to slip across the frontier into Germany, and home. I had had the narrowest escape in all my life over the Seiler affair, for had I been caught with the plans upon me it would have meant a long term of confinement in a fortress. Therefore my position was not a very safe one, and I was compelled to be wary. The agents of police are everywhere in Russia, and many a foreign secret agent is at this moment languishing

in the Fortress of Peter and Paul, or in that most dreaded of all prisons in the world, Schlüsselburg.

Hence, in order to report my arrival to the Foreign Office in case any untoward event occurred, I ate my lunch hurriedly and walked round to the Embassy, where I found the Honourable Frank Saunderson, the second secretary, in his room, the Ambassador and the remainder of the staff being absent. Saunderson had been my intimate friend at the time I was attaché, therefore I confided to him the fact that I wished to report myself as having arrived there on a secret mission. Of the nature of the latter I said nothing. It was understood in all the Embassies that my instructions from home were absolutely confidential.

“Well, old chap,” he said, offering me an excellent Babadagly cigarette—that mark that one cannot obtain out of Russia—“I thought you had rather a narrow squeak of it the last time you were here. Let’s hope the police have forgotten the Seiler business.”

“I hope they have,” I said, “for I know quite well that I’m running a most serious risk in returning so soon.”

“Of course you are. Keep your eyes

open, or you may find yourself under arrest. And we couldn't help you, you know."

"I know that. You'd deny all knowledge of me. That's understood," I said. "By the way, Saunderson," I added, "do you chance to know an English girl called Stanway—Clare Stanway? She's a friend of the Princess Ozeroff—maybe she's an English governess."

"Sorry to say I don't," he replied. "Never heard the name here. If she's a governess, perhaps the Consul might know her. The English governesses go to church, and the Consul's wife looks after them and invites them to tea at her house sometimes. She'd be the person to know."

"Do you know a man named Gribski?" I asked.

"Gribski? Well, there's Colonel Gribski, who was second in command in Eastern Siberia. He came back here after the Manchurian row, but he's at his post again, I think."

"Is that the only Gribski you chance to know?"

"I don't recollect any other. But it's rather a common name in Russia, especially in the Volga provinces."

Saunderson seemed most concerned about my personal safety. He knew that I had by good luck outwitted the Bureau of Secret Police, and that if they discovered my presence I should stand but little chance. Fortunately, however, I had on that occasion been known as Bernard Barry, representative of the Maison Galli of Lyons, and had carried with me two huge packages of samples of silk fabrics. My passport had been a French one, and I had stayed on that occasion at the "Angleterre," and not at the "Europe" as was my habit. So I trusted to the special providence which seems to watch over the lives and liberty of spies that I should not be recognized.

Having finished my cigarette, I rose and took leave of my friend.

"I'll tell the chief that you're here," he said in parting. "Shall we report you to home?"

"Yes," I said. "It may be best. Lord Glinton believes me to be in Rome."

"All right, old chap, I'll see to it," he said, adding cheerily: "take care of yourself, and don't be too rash. Remember that you're in Russia."

"I know! I know!" I answered. And

then I went out, strolling along the Court Quay back to the hotel.

I had been travelling almost constantly for seven days and was utterly fagged out, therefore I flung myself into the arm-chair, and in the silence of my bedroom thought it all over. I was undecided whether to send Clare a note by messenger telling her that I was in Petersburg, or go boldly to the Palace and inquire for her.

At last I decided, and wrote a letter to the Princess to be sent in to her if necessary, and after a wash and brush up, went forth again, walking up the Nevski as far as the Liteinoi Prospekt, which I traversed in the direction of the Neva, arriving presently before the imposing façade of the Ozeroff Palace, which I knew so well.

A huge, square, almost prison-like place, with numberless windows, it stood upon the quay facing the river, one of the most handsome buildings in the capital. In my time in Petersburg the windows had been mostly shuttered and barred, and the big entrance closed, but as I now approached it I saw that the windows were curtained, the great doors that gave entry to the courtyard were open, and standing astride in the entry was a big

Circassian hall-porter, in long drab coat with pale blue facings, and bearing on his cap the coronet and cipher of his mistress, the Princess Ozeroff.

They used to tell me that for years the Palace had not been opened, for Prince Ozeroff preferred his house in Paris or his château above the bay of Beaulieu, to residence in Petersburg or upon his estates in Kiev. The Ozeroffs were one of the noblest Russian houses, a feudal family of Lithuania dating from the thirteenth century, and related by marriage to the Imperial Romanoffs. Gossip had it that the Prince had quarrelled seriously with the late Czar Alexander and the latter had banished him to his estates, but the proud old Prince, instead of departing for Kiev, had shaken the dust of Russia from his feet for ever, for he died in Paris some few years later.

Arrived at the entrance, I inquired of the gorgeous porter in the best Russian I could muster—for I had never learnt the language well during my residence there—if there were a young English lady residing there by name of Stanway.

“I know nothing of such a name,” responded the man, with a superb air.

"You take in all letters and telegrams addressed to the Palace, I believe?"

"I do," he grunted, eyeing me as suspiciously as though I were a police agent.

"And have you never noticed any correspondence addressed to Miss Stanway?"

He hesitated, then, drawing up his gigantic figure, said:

"Well? And I suppose I'm not bound to answer your cross-questioning?"

"No," I replied. "But you are bound to do my bidding, and inform Her Highness that I wish to see her."

"Her Highness sees no strangers without appointment," he snapped.

Whereupon I produced the letter I had prepared and, handing it to him, said:

"Send that to Her Highness, and I will await her answer."

"I do not know if the Princess is at home," he grumbled, examining the letter back and front, and taking it to a side door, where a footman was in waiting. I saw the latter fling it upon a salver and carry it away to the maze of corridors; then I waited.

A full quarter of an hour passed, until at last the footman returned and, in a civil voice, asked me within.

Along several corridors I followed him, then into a great central hall, and up the wide, main staircase with its balustrade of crystal. Truly report had not lied as to the magnificence of the interior, for the atmosphere was warm, and in the hall and on the staircase were banks of sweet-smelling flowers—a striking contrast to the crisp frost outside.

At length I was shown into a small but comfortable library and left alone for a few minutes. Suddenly the handle of the door turned, and I rose to greet the Princess, but instead there entered a tall, sharp-featured man of military bearing, who moved quickly, carrying my letter open in his hand.

“You sent this note to Her Highness,” he exclaimed, eyeing me with some surprise. “Unfortunately the Princess does not know English, therefore she has handed it to me. I may as well explain that I am her secretary. Her Highness desires me to see you and to ascertain the reason you desire an interview.”

“The matter is quite a simple one,” I said. “I merely wish to know from Her Highness whether she is acquainted with a young English lady named Stanway—Clare Stanway.”

As I uttered the name I saw a distinct change in his face.

For a single instant his countenance went white, then flushed slightly, but so quickly did he recover himself that ere I had detected his confusion, it vanished, and I began to doubt my own eyes.

"Stanway!" he repeated; but his face was already a perfect blank. "Of my own knowledge, I know nothing of the lady," he declared. "You are probably mistaken in the address. Her Highness has very few English friends, and I think I know the names of them all. What caused you to make such an inquiry of her, may I ask?"

In response, I explained how Clare had left her address in Milan, and how a telegram had been forwarded to her in the care of the Princess.

He shook his head.

There was something about the fellow I instinctively did not like. It may have been his involuntary betrayal of surprise, or it may have been his thin, ascetic-looking face and his grey, cruel eyes which held me in repugance.

"The telegram was despatched from the hotel in Milan," I said, "and was delivered

here, otherwise it would have been returned to the sender."

"I have no knowledge of that," he replied, rather haughtily. "All I am aware of is that no occupant of the palace bears the name you mention."

"But the Princess may know the name," I suggested. "The inquiry upon which I am engaged is one of the greatest importance and utmost urgency."

"You are English—from London, I presume?"

I responded in the affirmative, then narrowly watching the man's face the while, I added: "The lady of whom I am in search was in London until a few weeks ago."

"And you have come here in order to find her?"

"Exactly. My journey has been a long one, and I should therefore esteem it a favour if you would kindly ask the Princess if she can assist me. Permit me to write down the name." And I took a piece of paper from the writing-table and wrote upon it in pencil.

I could see that my request annoyed him, and it was with reluctance that he went forth to seek his mistress. Even when he had gone, and I was left alone there, I feared that

he would not carry out my wish, but would return with a fictitious reply.

There was something about his manner which I could not define, I knew that, urbane and polite, he was, with a Russian's cleverness, playing me false.

CHAPTER XXII

WHICH IS SURPRISING

I FELT certain, now that I reflected, that mention of the name of Stanway had caused the man to start. His manner towards me altered from that moment. He seemed for an instant stunned; then, so quickly did his mind work, that ere the pallor overspread his thin countenance, he had already resolved upon a plan of evasion.

I had travelled across Europe to interview the Princess, and I did not intend to be balked by her agent, secretary, or whatever he chose to term himself. If it were necessary I could enter Petersburg society by the gate of the Embassy and should have no difficulty in meeting Her Highness at some social function. It was that thought which consoled me as I sat there awaiting the fellow's return. The room was heated

almost to suffocation, as in most Russian houses during the cold weather, and rising to gaze out of the windows I found that the vista was not an extensive one, for they looked upon the grey courtyard where the gigantic porter was strolling, his hands behind his back.

Suddenly I heard the smart trot of horses; and a closed carriage with the coachman in the Ozeroff livery swept into the courtyard and pulled up at a door immediately beneath the room in which I was, so that I was unable to see who descended. I noticed, however, that the big porter drew himself up and saluted as the carriage passed him. The occupant, evidently a member of the household, entered the palace, and then the carriage continued its way slowly up the courtyard to the stables.

The secretary seemed to be having a long consultation with his mistress, and I began to grow impatient. Upon the great place a silence had fallen, like the silence of the grave, until, almost before I was aware of it, the door was flung open and there burst in a thin female figure wrapped in rich sables—the occupant of the carriage that had just returned.

I stood absolutely dumbfounded. Words failed me. The new-comer was none other than she of whom I was in search.

"Clare!" I cried, springing towards her eagerly and grasping her hand. "You—at last!"

"You!" she gasped, turning pale and drawing back. "You—Captain Jardine!"

"Yes," I exclaimed gladly. "I have found you after all these weeks of waiting. Why have you evaded me like this?"

She regarded me with frightened eyes—those eyes that were so bright and full of expression—and the gloved hand I held trembled.

"I—I was compelled to do so. You know why! Ah!" she added, in a terrified voice, "do not recall it all, I pray you."

The light had died from her face and she stood rigid.

"But am I not your friend?" I asked, seeking to reassure her. "Did I not give you my vow of secrecy? I tell you, Clare, that although you confessed to me, I cannot—I will never believe you to have been guilty of such a crime."

Her pale lips trembled, and I saw that her eyes were filled with tears. There was in

her beautiful countenance that same look of terror and distress that I had seen on that first evening of our meeting at Sydenham—that night when she had been mysteriously attacked in the darkness by her companion.

“Then you have not, after all, thought of me as a criminal?” she faltered.

“No, far from it,” I answered, bending towards her and trying to allay her distress. “I am your friend, just as you have been mine.”

“Then why are you here?” she asked. “What led you to follow me here, to Petersburg?”

“A desire to see you again—to learn the truth from your own lips,” I said frankly.

“Who told you that I was here?”

“No one,” I answered. “I discovered it. You, too, Clare, have discovered who and what I am—that I am a spy.”

“Yes, yes,” she cried hastily. “But why have you come to Petersburg—why run such a terrible risk? You are known here!”

“I ran the risk because I wished to meet you again—because I wish to renew my friendship.”

She endeavoured to stifle her agitation, but in vain. To me she seemed as though afraid

lest we might be discovered there in company. At every sound outside in the courtyard, she started and turned pale. After all, she seemed more than ever a woman haunted by the shadow of her crime.

"Ah!" she cried, raising her eyes to mine in deep earnestness, "leave Petersburg at once, Captain Jardine. It is folly for you to imperil yourself in this manner. Get away across the frontier where they cannot touch you."

"Then you are aware of the reason of my last visit here, and its result?" I inquired in some surprise.

"Yes," she admitted. "I know all about it."

"And you despise me because I am a spy!" I cried.

"On the contrary," she answered quickly, laying her hand upon my arm in order to emphasize her words, "I admire and esteem you as a man of honour—as a man who has stood an honest friend to a friendless, persecuted, but unknown woman."

"Yes, unknown," I remarked. "Why have you always enveloped yourself in mystery?"

"Because I was compelled to do so. You

never believed, I suppose, that I was Russian?" And she smiled upon me for the first time.

"No. Are you?"

"By law only. I was born in England, and was at school at Richmond for years, so I pride myself that I am more English than anything else."

"I am anxious to have a long and serious talk with you," I said. "I have much to tell you."

"Of your visit to Rome?" she asked.

"Of that—and other things."

"But I cannot speak to you here!" she answered in a half-frightened whisper, turning towards the door. "He must not catch us together here."

"Who?"

"Bernowski," she replied breathlessly. "I must go. Are you awaiting him?"

I explained how I had demanded of him news of her, and that he had gone to inquire of the Princess.

"Then he may be here at any moment!" she gasped, for she was evidently in terror lest we should be found in company. "I must fly. Where are you staying, and under what name?"

“At the ‘Europe,’ by the name of Francis Vesey.”

“Ah! The same as in Rome!” she remarked.

Evidently she knew a good deal more about myself and my movements than I had believed.

“When shall we meet?” I demanded in breathless earnestness. “Make an appointment anywhere, and I will keep it.”

She reflected a moment.

“Ah, Captain Jardine, I fear for your personal safety,” she cried despairingly. “You may be watched.”

“Every one is watched in Petersburg,” I responded. “Where will you meet me?”

Again she remained pensive for a moment.

“Do you know the bridge over the Fontanka that leads to the Trinity Church?”

I replied in the affirmative.

“Then be there to-night at ten. It is an unfrequented spot, and we ought to be safe there—providing you are not followed.”

“If I am, I shall not keep the appointment,” I replied with a smile.

“Then good-bye till ten,” she said hurriedly, shaking my hand. “You must not give him a hint that we have met. Remember that.”

"All right," I said, laughing. "But don't forget the appointment. Recollect that I am here from Rome to see you."

In a moment she was serious again.

"We are friends. I have given you my promise. That is sufficient." And without another word she escaped noiselessly from the room and down the long stone corridor, leaving me amazed and staggered.

Our meeting had been a breathless, hurried one, but I saw that after the first surprise she was in no way averse to the attention I had paid her by travelling to Russia in search of her. Indeed, she was just the same bright, light-hearted, and yet mysterious creature that she had been during those days of our strange platonic friendship in the dark roads about Sydenham and Forest Hill.

The mystery of the whole affair became more curious when I recollected my strange discovery in that deserted house at Kensington, and the remarkable statement made to me by Italy's Sovereign.

I was wondering if she would that night keep faith with me after her promise, when the door re-opened and the thin-faced secretary, whom she had named as Bernowski,

and of whom she seemed in deadly fear, entered.

"I regret, sir, that Her Highness knows no one of the name you mention," he said coldly, with the same ineffable politeness as before. "The Princess is, however, connected with the English charity here, and thereby knows a good many of the English residents and their servants and governesses. She desires me to say that if she should come across any person of that name she will communicate with you. Where are you staying, may I ask?"

"At the Hôtel de l'Europe," I replied, asking him to present my best thanks to Her Highness for her kind promise.

Then, without more ado, I withdrew, glad to get away from the presence of the fellow.

From his manner he evidently knew nothing of our meeting. But he was a magnificent liar, if nothing else. I recollect now, I reflected at that moment, that Russia had lost in him a very valuable diplomat.

I dined at Pivato's, that well-known restaurant in the Morskaya, and for a long time lingered at the table, pondering and wondering.

Eager to meet my love and hear from her the truth regarding my extraordinary dis-

coveries, I glanced impatiently at the clock from time to time. The hours passed very slowly, however, and I wiled them away by glancing at the illustrated journals, and by strolling on the quays.

My sudden encounter with Clare, her mysterious hints, and her terror lest the secretary Bernowski should discover us together, were all enigmas. For many weary weeks I had been in search of her, but I now congratulated myself that at last I had been successful, and that in an hour we should meet again, and I should walk at her side as I did on those halcyon evenings before the tragic affair on Sydenham Hill. She knew my profession and all about me, but how? A thousand questions I desired to put to her in one breath, but was compelled to possess my soul in patience for another hour.

The sixty minutes passed at last, after seeming like a day, and with quick steps I hurried alongside the Fontanka Canal, the surface of which was frozen and snow-covered, until at length I arrived at the point she had mentioned as our trysting-place, the foot of the bridge which crosses the canal and leads to the Church of the Trinity.

At ten o'clock at night this spot is as quiet and deserted as any in Petersburg, and just the place for a secret meeting. I halted in the shadow of the bridge and glanced at my watch, finding that it even now wanted five minutes to ten. Overhead the stars shone brilliantly in the clear frosty sky, but the cold, although intense, was not uncomfortable, or perhaps it was that, my mind being filled with thoughts of the woman who was so soon to come back again into my life, I heeded it not.

I waited, standing against the stone buttress as shelter from the biting wind, my face turned in the direction in which I knew she would come.

The hour passed. Before me was a long, straight road away over the bridge; behind me rose the dark blue cupola of the church, spangled with stars. A dozen times I looked at my watch; a dozen times I noticed dark figures in the white, star-lit road which I believed to be hers, but were not.

Surely she would not disappoint me. No, I felt certain that she was as firmly my friend as I was hers.

Once or twice persons had passed me, some of them regarding me perhaps with a glance

of wonder why I should be waiting there, but I did not notice them. I was awaiting the woman in whose honesty I believed, notwithstanding her own confession and my own discoveries.

Strange how tenaciously we sometimes cling to a woman, even though she be worthless.

Would she come, or would she not?

I was again glancing at my watch and still standing back in the shadow, when, without being previously aware of it, I was surrounded by three shabbily-attired men.

In an instant I suspected robbery, and drew myself up in defence.

But almost before I could stir, I found myself seized, and one of the men said in a hard, authoritative voice, in Russian :

“ Your name is Jardine, an Englishman ! In the name of the Czar, I arrest you as a spy ! ”

My heart sank, and I was speechless. In an instant I knew the truth, and the last flicker of hope died within me.

She had betrayed me !

CHAPTER XXIII

SOME AWKWARD INQUIRIES

AFTER ten years in the Secret Service I had at last fallen into the hands of the police—and, worst of all, the Russian! My friends had all prophesied it long ago. Even Lord Glinton himself was ever anxious for my safety, knowing well what risks I was almost daily compelled to run. And now that misfortune had befallen me, no one, either Consul, Ambassador, or Foreign Minister, dare raise a hand to save me from the life-long imprisonment that awaited me. Governments never recognise their secret agents. They are outside the national protection. For ten years past I had known all that, and had taken the risks lightly in order to serve my country faithfully and well. Not that I was any more patriotic than others, but because I was an Englishman sworn to serve my Sovereign in foreign lands.

To the charge so unexpectedly made against me I made no reply.

The police had a drosky in the vicinity, and into it I was unceremoniously bundled and driven quickly away up the long straight street down which I had vainly expected Clare to come.

As we rattled over the stones, I kept a sharp look out on either side and, just as I expected, I distinguished her figure standing back in a dark entry watching me as I was being driven to my doom. There was a street-lamp at that point, and its rays fell upon her face, and upon mine. Her countenance was, however, veiled, but she no doubt saw my own as I gazed upon her reproachfully in the moment as we flashed past.

Then I sat back in thoughtful silence, my captors on either side gripping my wrists to prevent me escaping.

To the chief bureau of Secret Police, the dreaded Third Section of which one has heard so much from time to time, I was driven as rapidly as possible, and on alighting was at once searched by the trio who had effected my arrest.

The place was a bare kind of barrack with a number of large, ill-furnished rooms—apartments through which thousands of unfortunate political suspects have passed on the

first stage of their long journey to that land of no return—Siberia.

After a short period of waiting, during which time I was handed over by the police officers to an armed guard, I was ushered into the presence of a much-decorated, elderly police-officer in full uniform, who sat before a table. Leaning back in his chair he surveyed me critically, and as I advanced, with a guard on either side, he addressed me, saying :

“ Well ? You have been arrested as the English spy, Jardine—the man from Downing Street. Do you deny your identity ? ”

“ I deny nothing that is true,” I replied.

The elder of the three men who had effected my arrest entered and deposited on the table the contents of my pockets, while another man entered carrying something which I saw was my bag from the hotel. It had been secured and sealed.

“ I need not read over the charges against you upon which you are arrested,” the officer said. “ You will hear them soon enough at the court-martial. Let’s see what we have here.” And he turned over the objects found upon me, examining each of them closely.

The man who had arrested me handed him

my passport in the name of Vesey, the one I had deposited at the Passport Office earlier in the day.

The inquisitor opened it, glanced at the visé of the Russian Consul-General in London, and folding it again without a word, took up his pen and made some memoranda. My watch, knife, money and small revolver—without which I never travelled—did not interest him. He turned his attention to several letters I had preserved in my wallet, one of them being the note I had received from Clare while in Rome, and the other the letter from the King of Italy, which was, fortunately, signed only with initials. He knew but little English, although he pretended to understand both letters and made notes respecting them. My card-case, which showed that my present name was Vesey, also interested him, for it unfortunately did not tally with “J. B. J.,” my real initials, as engraved upon my cigarette-case.

He occupied himself for fully half-an-hour over the few objects, with the self-satisfied air of one who had made the capture of a notable character. It was not every night that a secret agent of the English was arrested, and I could see that my entry in the bureau

had aroused a good deal of interest among the many officers of secret police at that moment on duty.

From that office spread a network of surveillance the most far-reaching and the most ingenious of modern times. In every capital, almost in every one of the principal cities in the civilised world to-day may be found one or more agents of that wonderful organisation, while the keen but unscrupulous director of it all was General Khostoff, the stout, round-faced, grey-bearded man with the decorations before whom I stood.

Stern, brusque, with a sharp penetrating eye, he asked me questions without much preliminary and to the point.

"You were once attaché here at the British Embassy," he said. "Do you deny it?"

"That is not one of the offences with which I am charged," I replied.

"You are arrested as a spy," he said. "And you were acting in that capacity while nominally an attaché."

"All attachés are but spies officially recognised."

"You returned here last year and stayed at the Hôtel d'Angleterre as a Frenchman named Barry, a commercial traveller. You

came here to Russia, with a fixed object, namely, to obtain from Colonel Seiler the plans of the forts and defences of the port of Riga. You had known him in Monte Carlo, and you were on friendly terms with each other. The Colonel listened to your offers to purchase from him a copy of the plans, for you knew he had been gambling heavily during his term of leave on the Riviera, and that he had lost nearly all he possessed. For months he refused to become a traitor, but the sum you offered proved tempting to a ruined man with an expensive family of daughters, and at length he sold you the plans."

"You scarcely have the story right," I interrupted, smiling. "The unfortunate Colonel, when I disclosed to him at Monte Carlo who and what I was, offered me, of his own free will, a copy of the plans providing I could obtain for him a certain sum. The offer was made to me one night at supper at the 'London House' at Nice."

"Well," he said, "in any case you bought the plans, and he received the money. Our agent at Monte Carlo, however, had noted his losses and reported to us, so that on his return to Russia he was well watched. When you came to Petersburg you were at once suspected,

and very soon I had quite sufficient evidence that you had come prepared to deal with Seiler. Need I say more? You paid the money, and got the plans. The transaction took place in a room you hired for the purpose, but by a blunder on the part of one of my men you were allowed to escape. And I must say that you got across the frontier very ingeniously. Seiler was arrested, and on the following day, obtaining a revolver from one of his military friends of high station, who purposely sent it to him, managed to commit suicide in prison."

I knew it all. The man, like most Russians, was a confirmed gambler, had ruined himself at roulette, and had openly asked me if the plans of Riga were of use to the British Government. It was purely a business transaction, without any subterfuge, just as though he had sold me any commodity. I had handed him one thousand pounds of secret service money, in Russian notes, in exchange for them. He was a traitor in any case, for he had boasted to me while at Nice of the large sums he had obtained, two years before, from Germany for the plan of the secret frontier defences near Volochisk, the truth of which I afterwards proved.

"I do not deny that I escaped," I said.
"Why should I?"

"Well, you have returned? Why? Answer me that?"

"I am upon no political mission," I answered. "I wished to see a private friend."

"Whom?"

I hesitated. No. I would not betray her, even though she might have betrayed me.

"I refuse to say."

The officer shifted his sword that hung beside his chair, and smiled. Then, taking up a report, he glanced at it, saying:

"I noticed that on your arrival at Petersburg you first went to the 'Europe,' then to your Embassy, afterwards back to the hotel, and then you called at the Ozeroff Palace. For what reason did you desire an interview with the Princess?"

"I wished to ask her a question."

He looked me straight in the face for a moment, then said:

"You wished to know the whereabouts of a certain young woman—a woman named Clare Stanway. Do you deny it?"

I bit my lips in chagrin. The secret police had evidently watched all my movements since I had set foot in the capital.

"No," I replied.

"And why did you wish to see her?"

"I refuse to state."

He frowned, and bent to make a further note.

"Well," he said, looking up at me again. "You, as a secret agent of the English Government, know probably how we serve spies in Russia. In your own country they are free to do what they like, almost invited," he laughed, "but here the offence is one of the gravest. You have been instrumental in obtaining the secret of the defences of Riga, and your trial will be by court-martial, with closed doors."

"And my ultimate destination, Schlüsselburg," I added, with a grim smile, for knowing the utter hopelessness of my situation I had now become in a manner callous of the future. I had been betrayed, and all was over. My liberty was, I knew, lost for ever.

"Most probably it will be Schlüsselburg," he answered grimly. "You are not the first foreign agent who has been confined there."

Schlüsselburg! The very name of that awful place strikes terror into the heart of every Russian. It is the dark, grim fortress

on Lake Ladoga of which so many terrible tales are told, the Bastille of the modern Russian Empire, the place where the rat-infested dungeons are below the level of the black waters; where not one of those who have entered has ever been known to emerge again. Even the gaolers and guards themselves are prisoners, and only the governor, the sub-governor, and the three chief officers ever pass to and fro to the world, thus the awful secrets of the place never leak out.

A prisoner sent there is dead to the world for ever. The so-called horrors of Siberia, about which so much has been written, are as nothing to the grim reality of that lake fortress wherein prisoners still linger in total darkness, with only vermin for company and without exercise until, in a few months, or perhaps years, they die, diseased, emaciated and insane.

Assuredly my future was as black an outlook as man ever had.

When at last the General—after having had all the contents of my dressing-bag taken out and examined, including the portrait of Clare, which he cast aside after a glance—dismissed me, I was placed in a drosky and driven away over the Trinity Bridge to the Fortress of

Peter and Paul, where in a small cell beneath the level of the Neva I was left to ruminate upon my hapless fate.

I knew quite well that the Seiler affair had created the most intense indignation in Russia. By some unaccountable means the facts crept into the Press and the censor passed them, with the result that public opinion in Petersburg was much excited that a foreign Power should have obtained the plans of Riga's defences. The police had been in search of me everywhere after my sudden disappearance from the capital, and only gave up the chase when, a week later, I was reported to them as having arrived in London. The chase had been an exciting one, it is true, and I had had to pay heavily for assistance in getting across the frontier on to German territory. Nevertheless, I had escaped, and now blamed myself for a fool that I had, well knowing the risk I ran, walked straight into the bear's mouth.

And as I sat in the darkness of my damp dungeon that night I brooded over my foul betrayal. Deep down there, not a sound reached me save the low lapping of the waters around me, but so cold was it that my teeth kept up a continual chattering.

Do you, my reader, know what it is to abandon all hope and take farewell for ever of the world you have known and enjoyed? Probably not. Arrest, with a knowledge of a life sentence of solitary confinement until disease shall put an end to your sufferings, is fortunately the fate of few. It was my fate, alas! and knowledge of the black and bitter future that must be mine crushed from me all aspirations, all ambitions, all desire for life. The free world was mine no longer because I had trusted the word of a false woman, therefore I longed for death to put an end to my agony of mind.

Days passed, how many I cannot tell. All I recollect is that I had several mid-day meals. The big, uniformed warder with the bushy beard, whose face I could just distinguish in the glimpse of light that shone through an aperture far above, came to me twice each day. But to all my questions he was mute, a brutal fellow who treated those in his charge as mere cattle to be sent to the slaughter.

Through those long, interminable hours I had nothing to do, but to sit upon the bare wooden bench that served me as bed and think over the past.

Sometimes I counted into the tens of thousands to pass the time ; at others, I paced my cell, only three paces to be sure, but it gave me exercise and stretched my cramped, half-frozen limbs. I wondered constantly when I should be brought to secret trial—that trial with closed doors of which the Chief of Police had spoken.

I recollected, too, how he had disregarded Clare's picture. To me it seemed as though in searching a spy's effects, the fact of finding a photograph among them would lead to further inquiry, whereas, on the contrary, he had merely glanced at it and placed it at once aside without comment. Probably he knew her as the woman who had given information which led to my arrest.

And why had she done this? Had she not expressed fear for my safety ; had she not urged me to fly? I could see the motive, however, quite plainly. She feared that I should betray her as a murderess, therefore she had consigned me to a living tomb.

CHAPTER XXIV

BEFORE THE SECRET TRIBUNAL

THE secret tribunal of the Russian Empire, before whom are arraigned those guilty of political offences, sat in a room at the Imperial Military Court of Justice and investigated the charges against me.

For three long weeks I had been in that damp cell, the walls of which were black with slime, and so used was I to the darkness that when brought before the court-martial I could scarcely distinguish them owing to the dazzling light.

Presently, however, when my eyes became accustomed to the day, I saw that the court was composed of nine officers of high rank, the breast of each sparkling with decorations.

Their various uniforms gave a touch of colour to the great, bare, sombre room with the ikon on the wall at the end, and there seemed everywhere about me the clinking of spurs and trailing of swords upon the floor.

Guarded by soldiers with drawn bayonets, I was brought to the end of the table where they sat, and then in guttural Russian the charges against me were gabbled forth. I understood sufficient of what was said to be aware that the Secret Police had been active and were not only acquainted with the whole of the Seiler affair, but of another little matter of a copied despatch which I had hoped was forgotten. Certainly my dossier was a formidable one, and it was a foregone conclusion that my guilt would be established.

Therefore, hour after hour, I stood before them, mute to all their questions and utterly heedless of the testimony given against me. They did all in their power to compel me to make some statement, but I blankly refused.

“ I am charged with espionage ? ” I said.
“ I admit it.”

Through five weary days the inquiry proceeded. To me the court-martial was rather pleasant than otherwise, for each morning I was brought from my damp dungeon and allowed for eight or nine hours to see the blessed light of day. At last, however, it ended, and judgment was pronounced against me by the white-headed General, who acted as

President—imprisonment for life, just as I had anticipated.

Some of the officials looked at me pityingly, when the terrible decree was read, but I only shrugged my shoulders and turned away between the guards.

My career had ended. I had been fooled by a woman. The fault was entirely mine. I had played the game honestly and fairly, but had been outwitted.

At the Embassy, of course, they were long ago aware of the disaster that had befallen me, and no doubt Lord Glinton had been made acquainted with my misfortune. But none durst raise a hand to save me. I was a spy—therefore beyond assistance or protection.

I was not kept long in suspense as to my ultimate destination, for on the second night after my sentence I was bundled into a gray-painted, closed cart, and driven away out of the city, far across those flat, inhospitable lands for forty miles, to the silent shore of Lake Ladoga. After about six hours, the vehicle stopped and I was placed in a boat and rowed out to the island fortress of Schlüsselburg, the very name of which is synonymous in Russia with all that is terrible.

Around the island, at a certain distance, are anchored red buoys, and the armed guards have orders to fire without challenge upon any one who approaches within the forbidden circle. The secrets of that dreadful tomb of Nihilists and spies are assuredly scrupulously kept.

At the one water-gate in the high wall surrounding the island, my guards handed me over to the warders, together with a file of papers concerning me; then, after the exchange of a few words, rowed back again to the shore, while I alone entered the fortress.

My first place of confinement was far superior to the second, for whereas I had both a ray of light and a little fresh air at the Peter-and-Paul, at Schlusselfburg I was denied both; for led through a dozen dirty, narrow and intricate passages, each descending lower into the earth, I at length entered one passage where the small gratings of the iron cell-doors, unlike the others, were open.

At one the light of the lantern fell upon the wild, awful, unkempt face of a man who glanced at me like a wild beast, and bounding at his bars, tore at them with hands and teeth, screaming, chattering and cursing, all in the same breath. The warders merely laughed.

It was but one of the prisoners driven insane by the torture of solitary confinement. There were hundreds of others just the same.

I shuddered to think that I, one day, would be an awful object like that.

In a passage just below the one where I saw the gibbering idiot, a place so dark that even the lanterns of the gaolers seemed to give no light, and where the rats scuttled in hundreds from our path, a door was suddenly opened and I was thrust into the darkness, while a moment later the big bolts were shot into their sockets, the door was locked and my escort left me.

My heart sank. I had looked for the last time upon the world. Only torture, perhaps insanity, and certainly death were all that now remained to me. Better by half a death-sentence outright than the horrors of that stygian blackness into which I had been plunged.

Groping round with my hands upon the slimy walls, I very soon became aware of the narrowness of the place wherein I was immured. Oblong and slightly smaller than my previous prison, it, however, contained neither bench nor chair. A board lay along one side, together with some mouldy straw,

upon which I was to sleep. The atmosphere was stifling, but I would not have minded that if I had had but one single ray of light. Imagine my position, thrust in there, a place the floor of which was uneven with the filth of years, and where upon the wet walls my hands met cold creeping things that made the place their habitation.

How many unfortunate prisoners had, I wondered, died in that fearsome cell—men and women suspected of revolutionary tendencies, who had been spirited away from Petersburg at night and had never again been heard of. When you are in the Russian capital, make inquiries and you will hear on all sides of men and women who have from time to time disappeared—and the majority of them have found their graves in those deep, dark oubliettes of Schlüsselburg wherein I had been cast.

Days passed, hopeless, countless days, for I knew not when it was light and when darkness covered the earth. I was but a number on the prison register, and forgotten. Once every four and twenty hours a rough warder brought me food and water, and only then was I disturbed, save by the vermin that ran riot everywhere and would

have devoured my food had I not eaten it the moment it was brought.

The soul-crushing silence, the unspeakable horrors of the place, the dampness of the straw on which I lay, and the knowledge that I must linger there till death released me, soon had its effect. My limbs were racked with rheumatism, a high fever burned within me, and I suppose I grew delirious. I remember how one day, when my gaoler came as usual, I was unable to rise, and with a coarse jeer he tossed my piece of black bread in to me as though he fed a dog in its kennel. After that I have but little recollection of what occurred.

I am told that I had the narrowest escape from death, but all I know is that my next consciousness was of awakening to find myself in a clean bed, with a man, evidently a doctor, and a nurse in uniform watching me intently.

“Good!” I heard the man remark, in Russian, to the nurse. “The crisis is past! He will recover!”

Then I closed my eyes again at those reassuring words, and must have slept.

Next time I opened them it was night, for a shaded light was burning, and back in the shadow a woman was sitting at my bedside.

She moved and the light shone upon her face, causing me to start. The resemblance was so strange, yet my mind was so unbalanced that I saw the face of my love in everything.

She rose and bent over me in quick eagerness; then I saw, to my delight, that I was not mistaken—it was Clare!

“Are you better?” she whispered, in that soft, musical voice I knew so well. “Tell me how you feel.”

“I am getting stronger,” I answered, “but is it really you—my Clare?”

“Yes,” she responded, with a sweet smile, “your Clare!” adding a soft emphasis upon the word that meant so much to me. “Have no fear. You are in a place of safety. Get strong, so that you may travel.”

“But the prison—that awful cell——”

“Forget it,” she urged. “I have been successful in rescuing you, but how, you shall know later. There, go to sleep again,” and for the first time in her life she touched my brow with her sweet lips.

I slept and in the morning found her place taken by the nurse. The latter forbade me to speak, and for several days I remained there filled with wonder as to how my love

had succeeded in extricating me from that dungeon.

It was not she, after all, who had betrayed me—that was plain. The person who had given information to the police was the secretary, Bernowski, the man she had feared.

My recovery was rapid, and one day, quite unexpectedly, Clare came to me again, telling me that on the morrow, if I were well enough, she would contrive my escape from Russia and would accompany me. I found that the house in which I was concealed was outside the town of Viborg, and that from my window I could see the waters of the Gulf of Finland.

To detail the manner in which I escaped, for the second time, from the Land of the White Czar would only weary the reader. Suffice it to say that by good fortune the ice had just broken up, and an English steamer that had been frost-bound all the winter lay, with others, in the harbour. Clare had evidently spared no effort to ensure my safety, for on the following day I was attired in the nurse's clothes and then drove with her into the town and went on board, where I found the English skipper anxiously awaiting me.

"We've got to run the gauntlet of the police, sir," he said, after greeting me. "I've been to Petersburg and seen 'em at the Embassy. I know the whole story, so you needn't tell me. You've had a jolly narrow squeak of it, haven't you? I've got a nice comfortable packing-case ready for you down in the hold, so I'll take you down at once. Lay quiet and make yourself cosy while they search the ship; then we'll weigh anchor and away for Hull."

"What's the name of this ship?" I asked.

"*Linnet*, sir, of London. An' my name's Nash—John Nash."

"Well, Captain Nash," I said, "let's hope we'll get through this all right. I suppose the Embassy communicated with you."

"Yes, sir. The lady who is your companion went to the Ambassador, I believe. Anyhow, she's arranged everything. But this ain't a time for yarning. Let's be off below." And he took me down into the hold and helped me divest myself of my encumbering skirts and stow myself in the packing-case he had prepared. Then he left me.

An hour later the police and Customs officers made their usual search, and presently,

greatly to my relief, I at last felt the jar of the propellers as the steamer slowly put forth into the Gulf of Finland on her homeward voyage.

For several hours he kept me there until at last, just before sundown, he released me, and with heart leaping for joy, I rejoined my love, who awaited me in the skipper's cabin.

Ah! how can I describe that meeting, for once again I was free, free to breathe the fresh sea air, free to live—free to love!

I took her in my arms and she allowed me to kiss her dear lips. Yes, I loved her, even though she confessed herself guilty of that crime at Sydenham. She alone had rescued me from my living tomb below those deep, black waters, and as we sat together, she told me how she had contrived to effect my escape. She told me in confidence that General Nelidoff, the assistant governor of Schlussemburg, was a relative of hers, and that, in response to her supplication, he had one day caused my removal to the cell of a prisoner who had died, placing the body of the last-named in the oubliette I had occupied. At night I was removed from the prison as dead, and struck off the register, but instead

of being buried on the island, a boat was in waiting, and my insensible form was rowed ashore where post-horses carried me to Viborg. She would give me no details, but merely remarked :

“ You are the first who has ever escaped alive from there, and I expect half-a-dozen persons must have been in the secret.”

“ And it was you who informed the Embassy ? ” I asked.

“ Yes ; I called upon the Ambassador on the day following your arrest, and we arranged your escape together. Captain Nash was sent for and agreed to take you to England if you could be got out of prison, and, as I’ve told you, I succeeded in arranging that.”

“ It was Bernowski who gave information to the police, I suppose ? ”

“ Yes,” she answered.

“ Why ? ”

“ Because he fears you, and wishes to close your lips for ever.”

“ Why, I had never set eyes on the fellow before that day ! ” I cried in surprise.

“ Why should he hold me in fear ? ”

“ He has suspicions,” she answered. More than that she would not say, although I

questioned her closely upon the secretary's curious antipathy towards me.

Time passed unheeded as the vessel ploughed her way through the intricate passages between the ice floes and the cabin became flooded with the blood-red glow of the northern sunset. We sat there, hand in hand. I asked her many questions, to some of which she gave answer, but to others was mute.

I dared not refer to that terrible incident at Sydenham. By mutual consent, as it were, we avoided it. And I said nothing about the gruesome discovery I had made at Kensington. Now that I was free again, I recollected my duty—the mission entrusted to me by Lord Ginton and the Italian King.

I spoke of my profession of secret agent, and how unsuccessful my visit to Rome had been.

She inquired the reason of my journey there, and I told her frankly why I had gone, and of the peril that threatened both England and Italy.

“And you, Clare, can save my country, if you will,” I added, in deep earnestness as I bent towards her. “The treaty negotiations between Italy and France, to oust England from her position, are still in progress, and by

your aid alone I can obtain the knowledge of which I am in search."

"Me!" she cried in surprise, turning slightly pale. "Who told you so?"

"His Majesty Victor Emanuel of Italy. He sent me in search of you," I answered calmly.

"The King!" she panted, utterly taken aback. "He told you—told you who or what I am? He told you my story?"

"He told me that you could help us," I answered, in a low, earnest tone. "I seek your aid now; will you give it to save the honour of England and the Italian betrayal?"

She held her breath, her small hand trembled in mine, and in her great dark eyes I saw a look such as I had never seen there before—the look of a woman desperate in the conflict of her emotions.

CHAPTER XXV

IN WHICH CLARE FULFILS A PROMISE

AFTER a cold, tempestuous voyage down the Baltic, Captain Nash, in compliance with my request, put us ashore one night at the dreary little town of Stralsund, on the

Pomeranian coast, whence I dispatched cipher telegrams to Downing Street and to Rome announcing my escape, and stating that I was returning to Italy without delay.

The week spent at sea had braced me up almost to my old self again; therefore, after wishing farewell to the bluff skipper of the *Linnet* and sending off the despatches, we took train to Berlin, the first stage of our long journey due south.

To my appeal to render assistance in my secret mission she had at last acceded. I think her decision was in great part owing to the King of Italy's request. Towards me she displayed just the same charming tenderness of manner as in those early days of my love. And yet she appeared to have a fixed set purpose, of which she, however, would tell me nothing.

"Wait in patience," she said. "I am not yet certain if I am able to assist you—not until I make inquiries in Rome."

Ah! how I loved her. I lived for her alone; she was my well-beloved.

The hours had passed in indescribable happiness, and even the discomforts of the rolling *Linnet*, with its foul-smelling cargo of hides passed unnoticed in those days of my happi-

ness. But even now she gave me no sign that my love was reciprocated. True, she had kissed me upon the brow while I had lain on the sick bed at Viborg, and she had repeated my declaration that she was *my* Clare; but beyond that her outward exhibition of affection went no further than firm friendship.

On alighting at Berlin a copy of the London *Daily Telegraph* on the bookstall caught my eye, and, purchasing it, I glanced through it in order to see whether any political complication had yet arisen over the Franco-Italian treaty. Clare sat beside me in the waiting-room looking over the paper as I scanned it, when of a sudden our eyes simultaneously caught the headline: "The Mysterious Discovery in Warwick Gardens." I noticed that she started when she saw the words, and eagerly devoured every line. It appeared that the police had discovered that the house in question had been entered, and on investigating, found, just as I had found, the place in disorder and a dead man still presiding over the relics of a feast. To the police the whole affair was, of course, a profound mystery, and the papers had, it seemed, worked up the details into what is, I believe, known in journalistic parlance as "a first-class sensation."

She read it through; then her hands clenched themselves and a dark look overspread her brow.

"Paul!" she gasped, speaking aloud to herself. "My poor Paul! they have killed you—killed you! But your death shall be avenged. I see it all now! It was a plot—a foul, ingenious plot, and yet I was in ignorance of it all!"

For a few moments she remained much agitated; then, turning to me, she said in a low, hard voice:

"Captain Jardine, we have no time to lose. Let us continue our journey to Rome without delay."

I told her that it was myself who had effected an entrance to that closed house in Warwick Gardens and discovered Paul Rossifer dead; but she gave me no explanation of her words. All she answered was:

"I have found a friend in you, Captain Jardine—and you will find a friend in me."

In a street outside the railway station I made a few purchases necessary for the journey to Italy. Captain Nash had given me his shore-going blue serge suit and a peaked cap; therefore I presented something of a nautical cut,

but Clare pronounced the things an excellent fit and becoming.

At mid-day, having crossed the German capital, we took train south with the Eternal City for our destination. I had no money, all of it having been taken from me by the Chief of the Secret Police in Petersburg, but my love was well supplied and laughingly told me that I must consider her my banker for the present. And so we journeyed on from one point to another in slow trains until at last we arrived in Venice, and thence travelled direct to Rome, arriving there on the fifth day after disembarking from the *Linnet*.

She had been in Rome before, she told me ; therefore on emerging from the station she at once entered the omnibus of the Grand Hotel, and I that of the "Russie." I promised to call on her later in the day—after I had been to the Embassy.

An hour later Lord Clancare hailed me warmly, saying :

"By Jove! Jardine, you've had a narrow squeak of it! There have been all sorts of despatches flying about regarding you. As soon as I got your news from Stralsund, I went round and had audience. His Majesty was delighted, and commanded me to bring both

you and the lady to see him at once. He's most interested in the lady—Stanway is her name, isn't it ? ”

“ Yes,” I responded ; then casting myself into a chair I told him briefly of my startling discovery in the closed house at Kensington and of my subsequent adventures.

In response to my inquiries, he explained that the secret negotiations were still in progress between the Foreign Minister, Vizardelli, and Delcassé, and that absolutely nothing had leaked out regarding them. The Count de Suresnes had a week ago left hurriedly for Paris to consult his chief, and had not yet returned. Therefore it was supposed that some hitch had occurred in the negotiations, or that the adventurer Vizardelli's palm had not yet been sufficiently well lubricated with secret service money.

In any case, however, His Majesty and His Excellency were both of opinion that the complete terms of the alliance had actually been arranged, and that in a few days it would be presented for signature. Indeed, at any moment the royal assent, under compulsion owing to the popular feeling, might sweep away the power of Britain in the Mediterranean.

I saw England's peril, just as Lord Clancare foresaw it, but upon Clare Stanway all our hopes were centred. Yet neither of us could see in what manner she could assist us. The only thing that would be of any use to us was a copy of the draft treaty. How could she possibly obtain this when every precaution had been taken to secure its secrecy?

Fagged out by the long journey, she was resting; therefore, I excused her from having audience that day.

It was nearly eight o'clock when, according to appointment, I called to dine with her at the "Grand." She was bright and spruce, looking remarkably well dressed considering the smallness of her wardrobe, for, like myself, she had but little more than what she stood up in.

I told her of my visit to the Embassy, and of the King's wish to give her audience, to which she replied:

"I can see no object to be gained by going to the Quirinal. Tell Lord Clancare to inform His Majesty that I have not forgotten my promise, and that I am here for the purpose of fulfilling it. His Majesty will understand."

"Then you have no wish to go to the palace?"

"No. At present I have other matters to occupy me," she answered decisively.

I explained how desperate was the situation, and how near Italy and England were to betrayal, whereat she sat with her elbows on the table, plunged deep in thought.

"I think," she said gravely, at last, "that here, in Rome, we should be strangers, Captain Jardine. I have certain inquiries to institute, and must be active. If you were seen in my company, especially by the person of whom I warned you—the person who knows who and what you are—my efforts may be checkmated. In this affair the utmost caution is necessary, otherwise we may blunder, and a blunder may cost us dearly."

"Then you anticipate that you can get at the secret?" I asked eagerly.

"I hope so, but of course I cannot tell. I have not yet commenced to investigate," she responded with a smile. "From to-night we must be strangers in Rome. Whenever you meet me, or in whatever company I may be, you must not acknowledge me. Remain at the 'Russie,' and when I require your aid I will call you."

I was surprised at this. Truth to tell, I

did not care to leave her alone in a city of young elegants like Rome.

I protested, but she was firm.

"In this affair I must have complete liberty of action," she insisted. "I have inquiries and observations to make that must be conducted in strictest secrecy."

"Even from me?" I asked.

"Yes—even from you."

CHAPTER XXVI

DISCLOSES THE SECRET

DAY followed day, but I received no word from my love. The season in Rome was at its height. A dozen times I met her in various parts of the city, generally driving, but always alone. Of the direction in which she was making inquiries I was in complete ignorance.

After a week of inactivity, during which period I whiled away my days in the hotel, in the cafés, and in the Corso on the off-chance of sight of the woman I loved, I one morning opened my *Tribuna*, and to my surprise saw that de Suresnes, the French Ambassador, had returned from Paris on the previous night

and held a consultation with the Minister, Vizardelli, an hour afterwards. The journal hinted, that the reason of the Ambassador's journey to Paris had been in connection with the proposed treaty with France, and stated on high authority that all details having now been arranged, he carried with him to Rome the draft treaty for the approval of the Italian Cabinet.

Affairs had now assuredly reached a climax. If Vizardelli recommended its acceptance, his fellow-adventurers who formed the Cabinet would not dare to differ.

I cut the paragraph out and, enclosing it in a blank sheet of paper, sent it to Clare by messenger. She would read it, and recognize from the envelope whence it came.

An hour later a waiter handed me a note from her. It only contained the curt words, "I am aware of it." Nothing else. Perhaps she was annoyed that I had held communication with her after her express desire that I should not do so.

That day passed anxiously, and as night fell I could not conceal from myself the fact, that the draft treaty which the French Ambassador had undoubtedly brought with him from Paris, was now deposited at the

Ministry of Foreign Affairs for Vizardelli's acceptance.

Ah! if I could only obtain sight of it for five minutes and learn the truth!

When out for my evening stroll I passed the fine offices of the Ministry, but they were in darkness save in the half-dozen long windows of the Minister's private cabinet and waiting-rooms, where lights still burned.

For a moment I halted and looked up at them. Perhaps at that very hour, by a stroke of the pen, the balance of power on the sea was being altered.

Was it possible that Clare had failed in her plan which she had kept such a secret? The treaty had already been in Rome for four-and-twenty hours, which allowed quite sufficient time for its presentation to the Cabinet. For aught I knew the Council of Ministers had already accepted the bait offered them by our French friends.

As with a sigh I turned away, a brougham drove out of the dark courtyard and dashed past me. A man was inside, and I recognised de Suresnes, on his way home.

To me it seemed as though the negotiations were concluded. If so, then there had been effected the greatest diplomatic *coup* of



modern times, and England had been dealt a blow that must stagger her.

I hurried up to the Embassy, but His Excellency was dining with the German Ambassador; therefore I could learn nothing. I saw Lady Clancare in the drawing-room for a moment, but she had not seen her husband all day, and was just as ignorant as myself.

Near ten o'clock I returned to the "Russie," and on entering the hall porter handed me a note from Clare making a strange appointment.

"At eleven o'clock, go to the Villa Fiore, which you know well. Climb the wall into the grounds, and conceal yourself behind the statue of Perseus, which you will find on the left close to the house. Remain there until I come. Be careful your presence is not detected, and you had better be armed in case of necessity. If I do not join you before daybreak then leave your post."

It sounded like the commencement of an exciting adventure, and such it verily proved.

At the hour she named I drove in a cab across the city to the vicinity of the villa, and after some difficulty succeeded in climbing the high stucco wall. The night was by no means dark, and I was compelled to move

cautiously in the shadow while in search of the marble statue of Perseus among the many in the beautiful grounds.

I found it at last. It had a big square base and was almost close to the wall of the house, within arm's-length of the window of Mademoiselle's boudoir, which I knew so well. The intervening space between the pedestal and the wall made a magnificent hiding-place, and into it I crouched, prepared for a long vigil.

The appointment was certainly a strange one, for I had no idea she had become acquainted with Madame Dumont and her pretty niece. The balmy, flower-scented air was still, and from my place of concealment I could see away in the darkness, the rows of twinkling lights around St. Peter's and the Vatican. Church bells came up from the valley now and again, but in that quarter of the city it was quite rural, unlike the crowded parts on the opposite side of the Tiber.

Within the boudoir I could hear voices in conversation, but window and shutters being closed I could not distinguish whose they were. My eyes were ever strained into the darkness, my ears were alert to

catch sight or sound of my well-beloved, who was to meet me in that strange spot. Midnight passed, and with it the clouds slowly opened and the moon shone out, lighting up the grounds with their orange trees and statuary, and the distant panorama of the unchanging city, until it spread before me like a fairyland. Another two hours went by, and it was, by my watch, past two o'clock, when of a sudden I heard the quick jingling of spurs and the trailing of a sword on gravel. Then I peered forth from my hiding-place and saw, as I expected, my friend Lorenzo approaching the house. He walked quickly, almost out of breath, and the door opened noiselessly to receive him as though he were expected.

I thought I heard his voice within the boudoir a few moments later, but was not quite certain. At any rate, those who had been chattering in that room left it on his arrival, and I was doomed to wait long and wearily for his reappearance. He came forth just before three, stealing noiselessly away down the drive, for, I supposed, he did not wish it known that he met his love at that extraordinary hour.

As he turned the corner of the house, a few

feet from my place of concealment, I saw by the light of the moon that his face was white, haggard and much changed. Perhaps he had at last received his congé, for he hurried away as though the place were now hateful to him, and was in a moment swallowed in the darkness.

Again there were voices of the occupants in the boudoir, who were still astir; but very soon they retired to rest, for I noticed that the narrow ray of light that had shone through the chink of the shutter was now extinguished.

Still I waited and waited, cold, cramped, and wondering why my love had made such a curious tryst, and why, moreover, she did not keep it.

Already I could see far away over the hills beyond Tivoli the first faint flush, that heralded the dawn and would in half-an-hour's time release me from my apparently useless vigil. The birds were beginning to stir, and over the face of things was that strange murmur of life awakened that one hears just before the dawn.

At last a slight sound caused me to start and draw back. It was as though one of the servants, already astir, was opening

the window of the boudoir. I listened again, my eyes upon the window. Yes! the shutters were opened.

In an instant I dived down beneath the window, out of sight, and there remained with bated breath.

Presently, slowly and noiselessly, the long French window was pushed forward, and I heard a soft whispering voice ask in English :

“ Are you still there ? ”

My heart leaped into my mouth. I rose and saw Clare standing within the room.

“ Quick ! ” she whispered beneath her breath. “ Take it, and return without delay to London. Begone or you may be discovered. I shall be at the Euston Hotel this day week. Till then, farewell.” And she stretched forth her hand and gave me a bulky official envelope with a big black seal that had been broken.

Next instant she had closed the window and the shutters as silently as she had opened them, and I was left, bewildered, with the precious packet in my hand.

Without examining it I placed it in my pocket, and made my exit by the gate—the lodge-keeper being now asleep—and hurried into the city as fast as my legs could carry me.

Not an instant did I lose in seeking Lord Clancare, and in his bedroom I opened before his eager eyes the big envelope, and drew forth the original treaty, just as the French Ambassador had brought it with him from Paris.

The hot excitement of the next hour can well be imagined. A long cipher dispatch was sent to the Marquess of Glinton, giving the exact terms of the proposed agreement, and the advantages offered by France, which, by the way, included the cession of that long-coveted strip of land between Ventimiglia and the Var River, commonly known as the French Riviera, which was once Italian territory, and which every patriotic Italian hopes will one day be regained.

Then when two duplicate copies of the full draft had been taken in type-writing—one for the Embassy and the other for His Majesty, who was at once apprised of my success—I took the original treaty, re-sealed it in a big dispatch envelope, and before nine o'clock that morning was on my return journey to Downing Street.

How the secret document had been obtained I, like both King and Ambassador, was utterly at a loss to know. One thing, how-

ever, was certain, namely, that my love had kept her promise to me as well as to His Majesty, and I knew that Lord Glinton, with the facts already in his hand by telegraph, would be able once again to thwart the ingenious conspiracy of our hereditary enemies. The forty weary hours between Rome and London passed slowly, but at last I found myself again at Charing Cross, with the indisputable evidence of French intrigue in my pocket, and before half-an-hour had gone by, I sat in the big, silent study with the great statesman who controlled England's destinies.

"I am gratified—very much gratified to see you back again, Jardine," he said in his sharp, thin voice, as he took the precious document from my hand and bent to read it beneath his lamp. "You have certainly had a long and exciting time of it. When I heard of your arrest, I confess I gave up hope of ever seeing you again. But you have done marvellously well, and may be glad to know that on receipt of Lord Clancare's dispatch giving the clauses contained here, England at once assumed such a firm position in the matter, that the Minister, Vizardelli, was glad enough to express his readiness to accept

a formal defensive alliance with us. The draft of this is in course of preparation, and will no doubt be duly accepted by the Italian Cabinet and signed by that good friend of ours, the King. To you, Jardine, is due all the honour in this complicated affair. I take none of it myself. You risked your liberty and life for your country's honour, and I shall not forget to see that your services are suitably acknowledged."

I thanked him warmly, then haltingly told him the whole story of the mystery at Sydenham and its tragic sequel, while he listened to my narrative open-mouthed.

"Most remarkable!" he exclaimed. "Most remarkable; and the young lady is actually to meet you in London on Saturday? When you know the truth I shall be glad to hear it—really a most romantic affair."

He was a man who betrayed surprise at nothing, but the story I had related held him breathless in amazement.

He was as anxious as I was to ascertain the means by which Clare had secured the treaty.

CHAPTER XXVII .

BRINGS MY NARRATIVE TO A CONCLUSION

THE Foreign Office allows its secrets to leak out only when there is some distinct object in so doing ; therefore, next day the papers were full of the affair, in order to expose to Europe how ingeniously France had been plotting against England's supremacy, and how boldly the latter had checkmated her. Nothing, of course, was said regarding the means by which the agreement had fallen into our hands, merely the fact that it had done so, and that England had taken up a firm and defiant position.

But the reader of this chapter of England's secret history, will doubtless recollect the surprise with which the facts were received.

Even though my mission had been successful and I was back again in the gloom of Great Russell Street, I had not the slightest notion of how Clare had been able to secure the all-important document which, if signed,

would have so seriously altered the political situation.

At last, however, Saturday came, and I called at the east wing of the Euston Hotel, where, in the drawing-room, I found my love seated, neatly dressed in black with a large black hat, calm and smiling—just her old self of the first days of our friendship.

Need I say how cordial was our greeting? Other visitors being in the room, she remarked that some quieter spot would be preferable for a talk. I suggested my rooms, if she would care to visit them, and the idea she at once adopted. So we took a hansom, and within a quarter of an hour she was sitting at my fireside in my own arm-chair.

“I know,” she said, with a far-off, reflective look in her splendid eyes, when I questioned her, “my story is a very strange one—as strange as your own adventures have appeared to you—a series of circumstances which, although they culminated in tragedy, brought us together, Captain Jardine.”

“That, in itself, was the happiest of all circumstances,” I declared fervently.

“Well,” she exclaimed, “I suppose I ought first to explain that my name is Rossifer—Clare Rossifer. My father was Colonel Alfred

Rossifer, of Whatton, in Northumberland ; and my mother was Marie, Countess Ourouska, who on my father's death became the wife of Prince Ozeroff. My father was Russian-born, the son of an English merchant of Moscow, and had for many years before his retirement and death been in the Russian military service. My elder brother Paul, after occupying various positions in the Ministry of the Interior under Sipiaguine became, by reason of his knowledge of English, chief of the section of the Russian Secret Service here in London, being known as Captain Lock. About a year ago, while I was living with my mother in Petersburg, the Government became extremely anxious to obtain plans of your new submarine boats, then being built by Messrs. Vickers, Son & Maxim, at Barrow-in-Furness. Paul, accompanied by a secret agent named Bernowski, went to England for that purpose. He was joined later by a clever adventurer named White who was in the Russian secret service in Vienna, and who sometimes assumed the character of a half-caste, in order to further conceal his identity from the police. A few months later, Paul wrote and persuaded me to come to England, as I might be of assist-

ance to him, and, being fond of London life, I consented, little dreaming, however, of the dire consequences.

“ With my brother, I lived, for some time, in Friern Road, Dulwich, and during this period Paul managed to get on friendly terms with a certain Mr. Valentine, who occupied a responsible position in the firm of Vickers, and, together with Mr. White, who lived mostly in hotels, was backwards and forwards between London and Barrow very often. Gradually I was induced to participate in their plots, and on the evening you met me in the train going to the Crystal Palace, I was on my way to meet this Mr. Valentine, who had secured seats for the firework display. Instead of meeting him, however, I met White who, from his first arrival in London, had protested affection for me. He was of an extremely jealous disposition, and that was the cause of his attack on me, in the grounds, which you prevented.”

“ That proved a happy circumstance, Clare,” I remarked, “ for it brought us together.”

“ Yes,” she said, with a sweet smile, “ you are right, for I found in you a friend of whom I was sore in need. Shortly after our meeting, my brother bought the furniture

in a house in Warwick Gardens, Kensington, which he intended should, in future, be the headquarters of the section of the Secret Police in London, and he and I lived there together, Mr. Valentine—for whom I need not say I entertained no affection—visiting us frequently. Bernowski also had a room in the house which he used occasionally. During the weeks that followed, the submarines were successfully tried, in secret, up at Barrow, and at one of the trials White managed to be present. Afterwards, by means of a clever ruse, he succeeded in obtaining, through his friendship with Valentine and the employes of the firm, plans of the new boats. From us, however, he carefully concealed the fact that he had received the documents, which my brother and his companion were strenuously endeavouring to obtain. It appears, too, that he had discovered that I was in the habit of meeting you, and, having made inquiries, the three found, to their dismay, that you were the very last man with whom they wished to have association—in fact, that you were chief of the British Secret Service. They regarded your friendship with me as an endeavour, on your part, to learn their

business in England, and were naturally most hostile towards you. Paul, however, never believed very much in White's honesty, but when, by mere chance, he learnt that the stolen plans were already in his possession, he watched his movements, and his suspicions were confirmed that he intended to play the others false, and to sell them to Germany at a high price.

"On the night of the tragedy which we both so well remember, it seems that White, suspecting our appointment, followed me from Kensington, for at the top of Sydenham Hill he greeted me, walking with me as far as the pillar box where we had arranged to meet. He stood there arguing and urging me to give you up because, he said, you meant mischief. Suddenly I was startled by a sound behind me, as a man sprang out from the shadow of the wall, grappled with White for a moment, first dashing a handkerchief into his face, then plunging his hands into his pockets and securing their contents. White, with a cry, reeled as though drunk, and then, stumbling, fell like a log, and the next instant I was horrified to discover that his assailant was none other than my brother, Paul. 'That man was a traitor and a

coward, Clare ! ' he said to me. ' See ! Here are the plans, which he intended to hand over to the German Embassy to-night ! I've treated him as such hounds should be treated—I've killed him ! ' And he slipped away into the darkness."

She paused for a moment, to regain breath.

" You know the rest," she continued ; " how I confessed my crime to you, in order to save my brother. After leaving you, I returned at once to Warwick Gardens, for that night my brother and Bernowski had invited Mr. Valentine to supper. The last-named, however, did not accept, therefore we three ate the meal alone. In consultation, it was agreed to discharge the servants at once, under the pretext of immediate departure, and that, considering the tragedy and the fact that you would no doubt institute inquiries, I should leave England at once—going to Milan, for a week or two, as a safe retreat, Bernowski suggested. So the servants were sent off, and, in fear of you, I packed hurriedly and left just before midnight, spending that night at the Charing Cross Hotel and leaving London at nine o'clock next morning. It had been arranged, now the plans were secured, that Paul and

his companion should also leave for Russia next morning by different routes. On board the Calais boat, however, to my surprise, I met Bernowski, who told me that Paul had decided to travel viâ Ostend and thence by the Nord Express, and that, desiring to efface himself for a while, he would adopt the name of Gribski and accompany me to Milan. At that time, I, of course, did not know the truth—not until you showed me that newspaper in Berlin, and told me of your discovery in Warwick Gardens. Then the whole conspiracy became plain. White and Bernowski had undoubtedly been in league to sell the stolen plans to Germany.

“Bernowski, after getting the servants and myself out of the way, must have remained drinking with my brother and introduced poison into the wine. He then obtained the plans which, a few hours before, had been taken from White, and decamped. The reason of his desire to go to Milan was also clear, for on the day after our arrival there, a mysterious German called at the hotel and remained closeted with Bernowski for several hours. Without a doubt the plans were purchased by that stranger, for he left Milan for Germany that same evening.”

“ And afterwards you returned to Petersburg ? ”

“ Yes. The non-arrival of Paul was strange, but his movements were very erratic, and, being in ignorance of how the affair had ended, my mother employed Bernowski as her agent and secretary. You called upon him and he at once gave information to the police, believing that you were in Petersburg for the purpose of making inquiries into the double tragedy in London.”

“ But the occurrence in Rome ? ” I asked, utterly astounded at her remarkable story.

“ Ah ! When I saw in the paper that my brother had lost his life by dark treachery, I resolved to be avenged. I had always hated the Russian system of espionage, for I am much more English than Russian, but, of course, I had had ample opportunities of knowing, through my brother, the chief agents of the Secret Service. Two years before, I had, with my mother, been the guest of Madame de Nelidoff, the wife of the Russian Ambassador in Rome, and during our stay there had met the Prince of Naples, then heir-apparent, and his wife. The Princess was very kind and friendly towards me and our relations became so intimate

that one day I confessed to her and her husband, in strictest confidence, of course, the existence of a deeply-laid conspiracy of Russia against Italy. The Prince was at first not inclined to take my warning seriously, but I invited him to make inquiries about myself and my brother, and as pledge that I would render him secret service whenever it was required, I told the Princess the name I sometimes assumed—Stanway—and gave her the photograph which he afterwards handed to you. He made inquiries as to my brother's profession through the Italian Secret Service, I suppose, for a few days later he came to me and accepted, with thanks, my offer of assistance.

“ On our arrival in Rome, recognising the seriousness of the situation, I at once set about making inquiries and found that Clementine Beranger and Madame Dumont, the crafty old lady who posed as her aunt—both of them prominent members of the Secret Service of Russia—had laid their plans well and intended to secure the treaty as soon as it arrived from Paris. Young Castellani, who had fallen violently in love with the pretty Clementine, was to be the tool. To tell the story briefly, he contrived, on

that night, to be officer of the guard at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as he had often been, and, with the assistance of an expert safe-breaker sent purposely from Russia, they managed to blow open Vizardelli's private safe and secure the document. From your corner in the garden, you watched the gallant Captain bring it to his love, for the foolish fellow believed that by obeying her and obtaining the treaty, he was to secure her as wife together with her fictitious millions. She had arranged that he should at once fly to Paris and there await her. He is waiting now, poor fellow, ruined and a traitor to his country. Well, on the night of the great coup I had managed to get an invitation to dine and sleep at the Villa Fiore, and when I had seen the bulky document brought by the Captain, safely deposited in an escritoire by Madame Dumont, I went to bed. A couple of hours later, when all were asleep, I got up, took out the treaty, and handed it to you through the window, afterwards escaping myself. Old Madame Dumont is furious," she laughed, "for we have tricked the pair so neatly after all the money and trouble they spent on their elaborate plan. Your enemy in Rome, of

whom I warned both you and Lord Clancare, was Clementine, for she knew from Bernowski why you had been sent there, and she intended to expose you as a spy when the time was ripe. Her lover was the man, White, of whose death she is not, I believe, yet aware."

"But why did you do this—why did you run such risks on my account?" I asked her, amazed at her calm, straightforward narrative.

"Why do you ask?" she responded.
"Can you not guess?"

"Because you really loved me, Clare?" I suggested, bending down to her in deep earnestness.

For answer she raised her great dark eyes again to mine and allowed me to imprint a long and fervent kiss upon her lips. And from that moment there came to both of us that fulness of supreme content, the one thing unique in all the world—the happiness of a perfect and undying love.

Our marriage, a few months ago, was a purely private one, at St. Mary Abbot's, but among those who signed the register was no less a personage than the Marquess of Glinton; while among the many presents sent us by our friends, there was none that

I regarded with such satisfaction as the cross of Commendatore of the Crown of Italy, set in brilliants, which King Victor Emanuel sent me, together with his photograph; while from his queen came a magnificent diamond necklet, with a card: "To Clare Rossifer from Elena."

Our mutual love is all-sufficient; we desire nothing beyond our present bliss. We have taken up our abode in a delightful old house just outside Dorking, and one of my wife's first actions, after her marriage, was to write to the Italian King craving the royal pardon for Lorenzo Castellani. This, I am happy to say, was, under the circumstances, granted, and although he was not allowed to return to Italy, he shortly afterwards received an appointment in the office of the Italian Consul in Hamburg. The Minister Vizardelli was dismissed from office three months ago, and as for the murderer Bernowski, the sale to Germany of the plans of the British submarines—which were fortunately very incomplete and almost useless—was brought home by the activity of the secret service from which he had resigned, and he is now immured for life in Schlusselfburg, the place to which he had once consigned me.

Now you know the truth, and the romance of my strange courtship is ended.

Of myself, it is needless to speak further except, in taking leave of the reader, to inform him that I have now severed my connection with the British Secret Service, because, owing to some of the facts of this last exploit having leaked out, it had become unsafe for me to travel in certain European countries. My name, however, is still to be found in the Foreign Office List, and the confidential position I now occupy is, thanks to Lord Glinton, easier, more congenial and far more lucrative than my former occupation, when, owing to my many aliases, I used to be spoken of in our Embassies and Consulates as "The Man from Downing Street."

THE END

